

11/12/21 Friday

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Watch: Chinese Professor Drops Kung Fu Moves on Attacker in Los Angeles Street
By - Morgan Artyukhina

A daring scene that recently transpired on a Los Angeles street has gone viral on Chinese social media in which a would-be robber finds out he picked the wrong man to steal from. Zhou Pigai, a professor at Xiangtan University in Hunan, China, found himself in a highly unpleasant situation on the night of November 1, when he was confronted by a man who attempted to rob him at gunpoint, [according to China Daily](#).

The incident occurred when the academic was visiting Los Angeles, California, in the United States for an academic program at the University of Southern California. While he was looking for lodging in the Pacific port city's Chinatown neighborhood, Zhou was confronted by a man who held a gun to his head demanding his valuables.

However, the academic wasn't just a warrior of the mind: he's also well-schooled in Chinese martial arts, which he used to defend himself from the attacker.

"I remained calm at that time since I evaluated that the man, who although taller than me and strong, could not win a fight against me," [Zhou told the](#) Xiaoxiang Morning Post in his native Hunan.

In the video, which is a recreation of the attack, Zhou can be seen knocking the robber's gun-wielding hand aside with an arm strike while simultaneously rotating in to strike the robber's abdomen with his other elbow. As his attacker reels, Zhou then delivers a kick to his gut that brings both men to the ground and after getting back up, the professor makes a quick getaway. However, Zhou's escape was only short-lived: as he recalled, the man again caught up with him after he stopped to use his phone to examine himself for wounds after the first attack. A cut from Zhou's phone at the time shows him with blood rolling down the left side of his face.

This time, however, Zhou wasn't ready to take his chances and decided to hand over his luggage, which had an estimated \$3,130 in belongings inside. However, the robber then gave Zhou an opportunity, which he took, striking the man again after he reached for Zhou's backpack.

Again disarmed, but still holding onto Zhou's goods, the robber runs towards a truck that had followed the pair down the street, and the academic decided that discretion was the better part of valor. He chose not to pursue, unsure how many accomplices lay inside the vehicle.

Zhou said he then sought help at a nearby Chinese market, and several good Samaritans helped him get in contact with the authorities. One person even witnessed the incident and got the truck's license plate number, according to China Daily.

The Chinese outlet noted that the video recreation of the incident was originally intended for police investigation and public safety education. However, once the internet got ahold of it, the video and Zhou's story became massively popular.

According to the [Global Times](#), many social media users joked that the incident “ought to have taught the Americans a lesson to not mess with the Chinese.”

“Many foreigners think every Chinese person can do martial arts. Now it is even harder to debunk the truth,” one person said on Weibo.

“Despite that Professor Zhou beat away the attacker this time, I don’t advocate using martial arts to resist guns, because after the gun is fired, all your kung fu is useless,” another added. Indeed, Zhou advised that while he escaped with his life, it’s always risky to fight back, and coming to terms with losing your things is a rational choice for people to make.

“But if most people compromise, there will be an atmosphere to encourage the crime. So sometimes I will not retreat, thinking that brave people win in a hand-to-hand battle,” he added. While it’s unknown if the incident was motivated by Zhou’s race, violent [attacks against Chinese](#) and Chinese-Americans in the United States have dramatically increased since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, which some American politicians have tried to blame on China by calling it names like “kung flu.” Opponents of the violence have also pointed to increasing [demonization of China](#) as the US’ chief enemy on the geostrategic stage as helping to drive fear and suspicion of Chinese in the US, as well.

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Trump Adviser Steve Bannon Indicted on Two Contempt Charges After Defying Jan. 6 Subpoena
By - Morgan Artyukhina

Following his flouting of a subpoena by a congressional committee, former Donald Trump adviser and Breitbart executive Steve Bannon has been indicted by a federal grand jury for contempt of Congress.

Bannon, 67, is charged with two counts of contempt: one for his refusal to appear for a deposition before the House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6 Attack on the US Capitol and another for his refusal to produce documents for the committee.

“As detailed in the indictment, on Sept. 23, 2021, the Select Committee issued a subpoena to Mr. Bannon,” US Attorney Matthew M. Graves for the District of Columbia said in a [Department of Justice statement](#). “The subpoena required him to appear and produce documents to the Select Committee, and to appear for a deposition before the Select Committee. According to the indictment, Mr. Bannon refused to appear to give testimony as required by subpoena and refused to produce documents in compliance with a subpoena.”

Each count carries a minimum of 30 days and a maximum of one year in jail, as well as a fine of between \$100 and \$1,000, the release notes.

Bannon is expected to surrender himself at a DC court on Monday afternoon, [according to NBC](#). Following his refusal, the House [voted on October 22](#) to hold the far-right ideologue in contempt of Congress, with just nine Republicans joining the Democratic majority in passing the resolution. Their decision set the DOJ’s process in motion.

Bannon is far from the only figure subpoenaed by the committee as part of its investigation of the events surrounding the January 6 insurrection by supporters of then-US President Donald Trump to refuse to cooperate with the probe. Then-US Assistant Attorney General [Jeffrey Clark](#), Trump's then-chief of staff, [Mark Meadows](#), and of course [Trump himself](#), have all refused compliance, and Trump has sought through the courts to protect himself and those around him by casting documents sought from the National Archives under the aegis of so-called executive privilege. Federal judges have [repeatedly rejected](#) Trump's petitions.

All played major roles in Trump's effort to repudiate the results of the November 2020 US presidential election, which he lost to Democratic candidate Joe Biden, by claiming the ballot count had been fraudulent.

Bannon is [accused of encouraging](#) Trump to leave his hideaway in Mar-a-Lago in late December 2020 and go back to Washington, DC, to prepare for a "Stop the Steal" rally on January 6, 2021, that would take place while a joint session of Congress was certifying the results of the Electoral College's votes, which would make the November election results official and remove the last remaining legal barrier to Biden's inauguration two weeks later.

According to Bob Woodward and Robert Costa's book "Peril," which [recounts the final months](#) of Trump's presidency, Bannon was part of a January 5 "war room" meeting at the Willard Hotel next to the White House, from which Trump's close cadre of supporters pressured US lawmakers to challenge and repudiate the election results, including Trump's vice president, Mike Pence, who they believed could do so unilaterally as President of the Senate.

Immediately after the January 6 rally outside the White House, thousands of Trump's supporters marched on the US Capitol building, where they quickly overran the few Capitol Police officers assigned to guard duty and stormed the building itself. While they temporarily dispersed Congress, they failed at their goal of erasing the election results, and police and National Guard troops soon pushed them from the building. Tens of thousands of troops subsequently garrisoned the capital city and Biden was sworn in on January 20 under heavy guard.

Wider questions remain about why [so few defensive](#) precautions were taken prior to the protest, including why Pentagon brass were so slow to respond to urgent pleas for support by the USCP. The extent to which the riot was coordinated with or by [Republican lawmakers](#) and numerous [far-right elements](#), including militia members and [neo-Nazi parties](#), is also not yet fully known. Five people died in the assault, including a USCP officer and a female rioter shot by an officer outside the House chamber. Trump was subsequently impeached by Congress on accusations of inciting insurrection, but was acquitted by a minority of lawmakers.

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Beijing to Update Blacklist of Taiwanese Pro-Independence Figures, Financiers
By - Morgan Artyukhina

Taiwanese political figures who favor independence from China will be barred from traveling to the mainland under an updated blacklist from Beijing, which will also include their family members and those who finance their political campaigns.

According to a statement by the Taiwan Affairs Office in Beijing viewed by the [South China Morning Post](#), among those blacklisted are Premier Su Tseng-chang, Legislative Yuan president Yu Shyi-kun and Foreign Minister Joseph Wu, all of whom were added for “vigorously inciting cross-strait confrontation and malicious attacks against the mainland.”

All three are members of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), a Taiwanese nationalist party seen as embracing a radically pro-independence faction of Taiwanese politics in contrast to the Kuomintang or Chinese Nationalist Party, which favors [a closer relationship](#) with the People’s Republic of China, but not reunion.

Wang Jianmin, a Taiwan issues specialist at Minnan Normal University in China’s Fujian province, told the Hong Kong-based paper that the move could cripple the DPP’s political future, as many of Taiwan’s biggest political donors have sponsored politicians on the list.

“Many of these entrepreneurs have a lot of business activities in the mainland, so they have to consider if they dare to support the three [blacklisted politicians and their] relatives any more after this punishment is announced, which has a great deterrent effect,” Wang said, adding that “it is intolerable that these enterprises gained a lot of profit in the mainland while supporting Taiwan independence, and they are now panicking and have to stop.”

Notably absent from the list are Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen, who heads the DPP, and her vice president, Lai Ching-te, the latter of whom just a few months ago referred to Taiwan as “a sovereign state” that was “not affiliated” with the People’s Republic of China (PRC). However, a Chinese adviser told the SCMP the list would continue to be updated as needed.

The news comes weeks after Tsai [confirmed the presence](#) of US troops on the island, which documentation published by the Pentagon and Taiwanese Defense Ministry subsequently revealed extends back to at least 2008, and has included both [permanently stationed troops](#) and [rotations to the island](#) for training.

Beijing denounced the actions as “provocative” and said the US was “playing with fire,” with Chinese Defense Ministry spokesman [Tan Kefei saying](#) that “Taiwan is an integral part of China. The US has grossly interfered in China’s internal affairs, seriously damaged China’s territorial sovereignty, and threatened peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.”

The Taiwanese government, which calls itself the Republic of China, is all that remains of the republic declared in 1912 when the Xuantong Emperor abdicated the throne. In 1949, when the Red Army defeated the RoC on the mainland and established a socialist government in Beijing, it was unable to invade Taiwan, leaving the rump government intact. Both governments subsequently claimed to be the rightful Chinese government, but over the decades, all but a handful of nations have switched their recognition from Taipei to Beijing. The PRC regards Taiwan as a province in rebellion and an integral part of China that is destined to be reunited. So does the United States, which signed three communiques with Beijing in which it committed to ending its support for the government in Taipei. Nonetheless, Washington has continued to funnel weapons and political support to Taiwan. A bill recently introduced to the US Congress would produce a [\\$2 billion annual military](#) aid package to Taipei until 2032 to provide for its defense against China.

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'Best Day Ever': Los Angeles Judge Terminates Britney Spears' 13-Year Conservatorship
By - Evan Craighead

In September, a Los Angeles court suspended Britney Spears' father, Jamie Spears, from her controversial conservatorship. Vivian L. Thoreen, Jamie's attorney, characterized the suspension as "a loss for Britney."

Britney Spears' 13-year, court-ordered conservatorship has officially come to a close, following a Friday decision from Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge Brenda Penny.

"The conservatorship of the person and estate of Britney Jean Spears is no longer required," Judge Penny said on Friday, [according to the New York Times](#).

At the same time, the 39-year-old's ongoing financial concerns will continue to be handled by a new estate conservator, the judge noted.

"I think I'm gonna cry the rest of the day," the pop star said in an Instagram post. "Best day ever."

Matthew Rosengart, Spears' attorney, told a crowd of fans that the Friday decision, although solemn, is something to celebrate.

"Britney Spears has been faced with a decade-long nightmare, a Kafkaesque nightmare orchestrated by her father," Rosengart told a crowd outside the LA courthouse.

Rosengart revealed that the judge agreed with Spears' request to not submit to a psychological evaluation, which is traditionally conducted in such cases.

"I want to end the conservatorship without having to be evaluated," Spears told the court back in June.

When asked whether the 39-year-old will resume performing, Rosengart declared that the decision is now entirely up to Spears.

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'King, I Love You!': NYPD Searching for Woman Seen Trespassing And Teasing Lions at Bronx Zoo
By - Evan Craighead

New York native Myah Autry was previously arrested in September 2019, after footage uploaded to social media showed the woman trespassing in the Bronx Zoo's lion enclosure and taunting one of the big cats.

The Bronx Zoo announced on Friday that the New York City Police Department (NYPD) is again on the hunt for a patron who was recently seen hopping a barrier and harassing the lions.

Footage of the incident was captured by witnesses who also phoned police to report that a woman - presumed to be Autry - was "playing with the lions."

"King, I love you, I came back for you," the woman was overheard saying, [according to witnesses](#).

A spokesperson for the zoo clarified that the woman was not actually within the exhibit, which is closed off with a moat.

"Video shows she crossed a barrier into a planted area near the exhibit," Max Pulsinelli [told the New York Daily News in a statement](#). "The woman was not in the exhibit [and] she was never in the same space as the lions."

According to zoo, the woman fled the scene before staffers arrived.

"We have an NYPD substation in the park and are working closely with them to resolve this situation with this individual," the Bronx Zoo noted in a Friday statement.

The incident comes nearly two years after Autry was arrested for a similar deed that occurred on September 28, 2019.

"I entered his home in peace and he let me leave in peace. Shalom," Autry declared on social media, referring to the incident.

After taunting the NYPD on social media, Autry was charged with criminal trespass and reckless mischief after she turned herself in to authorities in November 2019.

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Turkish Court Extends Remand of Israeli Couple Detained for Allegedly Photographing Erdogan's Home
By - Evan Craighead

Earlier this week, it was reported that an Israeli couple had been detained by Turkish authorities after photographing the home of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The incident occurred just a few weeks after police in a covert operation arrested 15 alleged Mossad agents. A Turkish court ruled on Friday that the couple - identified by Israeli media as Mordy and Natali Oknin - must remain in custody for an extra 20 days [after allegedly photographing Erdogan's home](#).

Nir Jaslowitz, the attorney representing the couple, asserted that the couple was on an "innocent trip."

"This is the rare case where justice requires that the Foreign Ministry must do everything in its power to ensure that Israeli citizens are not detained outside the state's borders," said Jaslowitz, [as reported by the Jerusalem Post](#).

It was initially presumed that the couple would be immediately deported back to their home in Modi'in, Israel.

"All in all, this is a couple [who are] bus drivers. I ask that you release them immediately to their home in Israel," stated the couple's lawyer.

Prosecutors have argued that the couple was conducting espionage when they photographed the Turkish president's quarters.

Citing a representative of the Turkish prosecutor's office, lawyers claimed that the couple snapped photos of several palace security stands and cameras. The pictures were then sent to a third party, prosecutors asserted.

Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid reportedly met with the family on Friday to inform them that the government requested an urgent consular visit with the couple.

Lapid also insisted in a same-day statement that the pair "do not work for any Israeli agency."

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Photos: US Air Force Confirms B-52H Sustained 'Significant' Damage After Colliding With Fence

By - Evan Craighead

Earlier on Friday, photos emerged on social media showing the aftermath of an incident that damaged the right wing of a US Air Force B-52H bomber. The \$84 million aircraft in question is one of 76 of the mid-20th-century strategic bombers still in operation.

Barksdale Air Force Base's public affairs office confirmed to The War Zone on Friday that an accident occurred at the northwest Louisiana base, home to the 2nd Bomb Wing and the Air Force Reserve's 343rd Bomb Wing.

Images of the incident were first uploaded to Facebook by "[Air Force amn/nco/snco](#)".

"While positioning the aircraft for static display on the site, the aircraft collided with the fence directly in front of the [maintenance group] building", read the redacted Maintenance Operations Centre (MOC) Notification Worksheet.

"All pieces were recovered from the fence and the aircraft and there is significant damage to the right wing tip and the leading edge wing outboard of the right external tank", the memo detailed. No injuries were reported, and no further details on the extent of the damage were provided.

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Hackers Infiltrate FBI Email System, Send Thousands of Messages Warning of Cyberthreat

By - Evan Craighead

Confirmation of the cyber incident comes just hours after the Spamhaus Project, one of the largest anti-spam groups in the world, reported that emails from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Department of Homeland Security were issued on Saturday morning warning recipients of a "sophisticated chain attack" on its cyber infrastructure.

An external FBI email system has been compromised by hackers, according to a Bloomberg report, citing the federal intelligence agency.

The FBI also confirmed that the emails came from an '@ic.fbi.gov' email account, as seen in screen captures reposted by the Spamhaus Project. "Urgent: threat actor in systems," reads the subject line.

The email stated that a threat actor had been identified as cybersecurity expert "Vinny Troia, whom is believed to be affiliated with the extortion gang TheDarkOverlord."

"Should I be flattered that the kids who hacked the [@FBI](#) email servers decided to do it in my name?" tweeted Troia, who previously authored an investigation into 'The Dark Overlord,' a notorious hacking group.

No malware was attached to the tens of thousands of emails issued, according to the Spamhaus Project.

"This is an ongoing situation and we are not able to provide any additional information at this time," the FBI told Bloomberg.

Austin Berglas, of cybersecurity company BlueVoyant, explained to the outlet that the email system compromised by hackers is not one used for classified government information.

"This is an externally facing account that is used to share and communicate unclassified information," said Berglas, who previously served as an assistant special agent in charge of the FBI's cyber branch in New York.

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Unlikely That Tehran Was Behind Drone Attack on Iraqi PM, US Officials Say
By - Evan Craighead

On November 7, Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi survived what appeared to be an assassination attempt in which at least two weaponized quadcopter drones targeted his home. "Rockets of treason will not shake [...] the steadfastness and determination of the heroic security forces," the PM said. The attack was condemned by the US and Iran.

As Iraqi officials continue to probe the Sunday assassination attempt, current and former US officials are pushing back on the possibility that the attack was ordered by the Iranian government.

[Speaking to NBC News](#) this week, [former US Ambassador to Iraq Douglas Silliman](#) argued that it is extremely unlikely that Tehran was behind the attack on Kadhim, as such a move would likely trigger a chain of undesired violence on its border.

"I would be very surprised if Iran ordered a drone strike on Kadhimi. Iran does not want to see a completely destabilized Iraq," said Silliman, who served as an ambassador from 2016 to 2019.

"They simply want an Iraq that is off balance enough that they can have significant influence, both political and economic," he noted.

An unnamed senior US defense official asserted to the outlet that Tehran has failed to maintain its regional influence since the January 2020 assassination of General Qasem Soleimani, Quds Force commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

"It's fair to say that Iran does not have as much control over these groups since Soleimani was killed," remarked the active US official.

[Norm Roule](#), who served in the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) for 34 years, proclaimed that this is a "problem for everyone," as competition among militias in the region will likely continue amid a "political evolution" in Tehran.

Roule suggested that Iraqi and Western forces should improve their intelligence on "Iran's proxies in Iraq" if the US wants to protect top Iraqi officials. The former CIA official also asserted that the group behind the attack may have been "created, trained, sustained, and [guided]" by Tehran.

"If we are to be committed to Iraq's stability and preventing similar attacks in the future, the US and other partners must improve their understanding of militia plans and intentions," Roule asserted.

The remarks from current and former US officials come days after Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Said Khatibzadeh suggested that such an attack would be in the interest of US forces.

"Such incidents are in the interest of those who have violated the stability, security, independence and territorial integrity of Iraq over the past 18 years," he remarked.

"They have sought to achieve their sinister regional goals by creating terrorist groups that seek to stir sedition."

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US Acknowledges 2019 Airstrikes in Syria After NYT Report Reveals Dozens of Civilians Were Killed

By - Evan Craighead

A new report in the New York Times provides an in-depth look at two back-to-back, US-led airstrikes that occurred in Syria on March 18, 2019, that killed at least 80 people, including up to 64 women and children. It is now known that the unreported incident was at the time flagged by a legal officer as a possible war crime.

For the first time, US Central Command (USCENTCOM), the unified combatant command which oversaw US air operations in Syria, has officially acknowledged the series of strikes against targets near Baghuz, Syria, on March 18, 2019.

[Responding to the New York Times report](#), USCENTCOM detailed in a Saturday statement that American forces had confirmed 16 Daesh fighters and four civilians were among the 80 killed.

"We abhor the loss of innocent life and take all possible measures to prevent them," read the command's statement. "In this case, we self-reported and investigated the strike according to our own evidence and take full responsibility for the unintended loss of life."

USCENTCOM argued the strikes were "legitimate self-defense," and that it was unclear if the other 60 individuals - all women and children - were also militants.

Citing US personnel interviews, confidential documents and classified reports, the NYT detailed that the deadly strikes were quickly questioned by US personnel with the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC).

"Who dropped that?" asked one analyst in a secure chat.

"We just dropped on 50 women and children," replied another analyst, according to two people who acquired the chat log.

US forces dropped both a 500-pound (227-kilogram) and a 2,000-pound (907-kilogram) bomb on the area near the town of Baghuz.

Lt. Col. Dean W. Korsak, a US Air Force lawyer who flagged the strikes as a possible war crime, first attempted to get service leadership to investigate the strike.

At the time, an initial assessment after the strikes determined that there was a small number of civilian fatalities. After failing to make headway with Air Force leadership and criminal investigators with the service, Korsak alerted the US Department of Defense Office of Inspector General.

The US Air Force lawyer also emailed the US Senate Armed Services Committee, informing members that an American unit had purposefully submitted falsified strike log entries in an attempt to "cover up the incidents" on March 18, 2019. Korsak also said that US military officials had "intentionally and systematically circumvented the deliberate strike process."

Gene Tate, an evaluator tasked with the case for the inspector general's office, revealed to the outlet that Pentagon leadership "seemed so set on burying this."

"No one wanted anything to do with it," Tate said. "It makes you lose faith in the system when people are trying to do what's right but no one in positions of leadership wants to hear it."

Tate - a former Navy officer who worked for both the US Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) and the National Counterterrorism Center - asserted that he was forced out of his job after raising concerns about leadership's handling of the strikes.

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Spice Girls Reportedly Mulling 2023 Tour, Featuring Brief Reunion With 'Posh Spice' Beckham
By - Evan Craighead

Victoria Beckham, aka 'Posh Spice,' has been public about her ambivalence to return to the Spice Girls - even for a one-off tour. In 2019, Beckham told Vogue Germany that she had bowed out of the girl-power group's UK comeback tour because she wanted to focus on both her family and fashion line.

The Spice Girls (minus one) are expected to reunite for a new tour in 2023, according to a new insider report provided by The Sun.

"The four girls have been discussing a world tour for a while, and this — very confidential — meeting was put in the diary so they could iron out the final details," the source revealed.

Presently, the group is planning to begin its tour in Australia.

While their previous four-person tour raked in an [estimated total of £4 million \(~\\$5,366,000 USD\)](#) the group is expected to go all-out for their delayed 25th-anniversary tour.

"They are all very excited that the wheels are now in motion, and are hoping to give their fans a 2023 tour bigger and better than 2019," proclaimed the insider.

Scary Spice (Melanie Brown, aka Mel B), Sporty Spice (Melanie Chisholm, aka 'Mel C'), Baby Spice (Emma Bunton) and Ginger Spice (Geri Halliwell) are set to headline the majority of the tour, but sources told the UK tabloid that the women are trying to get Posh Spice to join them for at least one performance.

The performance would be Beckham's first time performing on tour with the group since 2008. Posh Spice notably rejoined the Spice Girls for a one-time medley performance of "Wannabe" and "Spice Up Your Life" at the 2012 Summer Olympics, but she has since expressed that she would rather not return to the music industry.

Beckham told Vogue Germany in a [2019 cover story](#) that "it took me a lot of courage not to go on tour with the Spice Girls again, but to be the one who says, 'You know, I'm not doing it because things feel different now than they used to. I'd rather concentrate on my family and my company.'"

According to the source, fans should not be shocked to find another famed UK songstress cheering on the Spice Girls.

"And one person who will definitely be in the audience is Adele," claimed the insider. "She is a real superfan, and told Mel seeing the girls in 2019 made her year."

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Michael Flynn: US Must Have 'One Religion'

By - Evan Craighead

Former US national security adviser Michael Flynn, who served in the Trump administration for just 22 days before pleading guilty to lying to federal investigators, was issued a full pardon in November 2020 by the then-US president. Flynn went viral earlier this year after offering to use an AR-15 in an effort to "find somebody in ... DC."

Flynn, while speaking at Clay Clark's 'Reawaken America Tour' on Saturday, proclaimed that the US should adopt a single religion.

"If we are going to have one nation under God - which we must - we have to have one religion," asserted the retired US Army lieutenant general. "One nation under God, and one religion under God."

"All of us together - working together," he added.

It is worth noting that the "under God" portion of the US' Pledge of Allegiance was not included in the original draft. While the pledge was written and published in 1892, the "under God," portion came about after then-US President Dwight D. Eisenhower urged Congress to make the alteration in 1954.

During the same speech in San Antonio, Texas, Flynn repeated his long-term baseless claim that the 2020 US presidential election saw widespread voter fraud. The former US national security adviser's complaints are not backed up by evidence.

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Videos: New York City Hit With Powerful Winds, Hail as Severe Storm Blasts Through Tri-State Area

By - Gaby Arancibia

A cold system moving in across much of the northeastern US has brought a powerful line of fast-moving storms to the region, as well as chilly weather, more than a month ahead of the official start of winter.

Residents in New York City and neighboring New Jersey were given a surprise after a rainstorm blew into the region and brought with it strong winds, colder temps, rain and hail.

The Saturday surprise prompted the the National Weather Service to issue thunderstorm warnings for the tri-state area, with a special weather alert issued by the Office of Emergency Management.

Video shared across social media captured tourists and locals doing their best to escape the downpour, while others marveled at the icy weekend present.

Ahead of the downpour, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio [warned](#) New Yorkers that wind gusts could reach up to 40 miles per hour. An [alert](#) later issued by Accuweather indicated that not only would wind gusts potentially reach 60 mph, but that coin-sized hail and continuous lighting was anticipated during the afternoon.

While the hail did not last long, the wintery surprise hasn't yet finished serving the tri-state area. Moments after the hail let up, warnings of a potential tornado hit the airwaves.

Weather officials have not yet confirmed whether a twister touched down, although it could take several days to confirm. Preliminary data from weather trackers suggests, however, that two circular systems made an appearance on radar.

Local news station NBC New York [reported](#) that the cold front prompted temperatures in Central Park to plummet some 16 degrees Fahrenheit over a period of just two hours.

The outlet [further indicated](#) that the cold front could bring a mix of snow to some parts of the region, with many areas seeing bitter temperatures for next few days.

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Gun Battle Between Rival Gangs at Ecuadorian Prison Kills Over 60 Inmates, Injures 25

By - Gaby Arancibia

At least 68 prisoners in Ecuador were killed over the weekend in deadly clashes between rival gang members. Another 25 inmates were wounded as authorities worked to regain control of the facility.

The weekend clashes began late Friday at the Litoral Penitentiary in Ecuador's coastal city of Guayaquil. The same prison saw a riot unfold in [early September](#) that killed over 100. Graphic videos show dozens of bodies being grouped together, with some being set on fire within the walls of the prison.

Pablo Arosemena, the governor of the Guayas province, told reporters that prisoners are alleged to have attempted at one point to "dynamite" a wall in order to confront rival gangs. Additionally, it was reported that machetes were used as weapons during the riot.

Authorities detailed on Saturday that it took the majority of the day for officers to restore order at the facility after the latest spate of fighting. The clashes are said to be between rival gangs with ties to international drug cartels, such as the notorious Sinaloa cartel.

Local media reports detailed that some 900 officers were tapped in the operation to retake control of the prison. It remains unclear why it took so long for officials to regain control.

The September incident at the site proved to be one of the most deadly outbreaks in the history of the country's prison system. Officials on the grounds later seized 13 firearms, 250 knives, five grenades and six kilograms of drugs.

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COP26: Negotiators in Glasgow Finalize Historic Agreement to Combat Climate Change
By - Nevin Brown

At the COP26 summit, international negotiators have approved a climate agreement that aims to reduce the use of coal and other fossil fuels and transition the industries of the planet to renewable and sustainable energy sources.

The agreement, [known as the Glasgow Climate Pact](#), was reached on Saturday and is the first of its kind in the 25 years that the United Nations have held climate talks.

Another key feature of the agreement is a call for wealthy industrialized nations, beginning in 2025, to double their financial support for adaptation efforts in the developing world - starting from \$100 billion each year. The nations most at risk, however, received no real-world guarantees from those countries that have most contributed to climate change.

UN Secretary General António Guterres, said, "Our fragile planet is hanging by a thread. We are still knocking on the door of climate catastrophe. It is time to go into emergency mode — or our chance of reaching net zero will itself be zero."

The agreement appears to be a half-victory for the earth's climate. It is the first COP text to feature the term "fossil fuels," and also includes an agreement to "escalating effort to phase down unabated coal power and phase out inefficient fossil fuel subsidies."

The agreement also provided a road map for stricter emissions cuts throughout the decade, calling for countries to bring their emission targets in line with the Paris Climate Accord's 1.5 °C of warming by 2022, not to be revised in 2025, as had been previously agreed.

Some activists, lawmakers and others were disappointed over the language surrounding coal use contained within the agreement. According to reports, due to pressure from Indian

representatives, the language in the final agreement regarding the use of coal was shifted from "phase out" to "phase down".

Concessions made to garner a broader support were noted by many. Alok Sharma, Britain's president of the COP26 climate conference, apologized and nearly broke down while speaking about the agreement and acknowledging the importance of its passage.

Many in attendance acknowledged that the Glasgow Climate Pact does not go far enough, but admitted that it was a useful first step.

Tina Stege, from the Marshall Islands' climate envoy, said, "We have much work to do, but it does represent real progress."

Famed environmental activist Greta Thunberg was far less than impressed by the COP26 climate conference and the Glasgow Climate Pact.

Climate scientists have revealed that if global warming increases beyond 1.5°C from pre-industrial levels devastating climate catastrophes could come into play. In this scenario, the ice caps would largely disappear and some equatorial areas could become uninhabitable, leading to a massive human migration away from, hot spots.

It is predicted that, to stay under the 1.5°C threshold, global greenhouse gas emissions caused by the burning of fossil fuels must be cut in half by 2030.

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Pop Goes the BBB: Trump Economic Adviser Believes Inflation Will End Biden's Build Back Better Act

By - Nevin Brown

Stephen Moore, an economic adviser to former US President Donald Trump, believes that the highest inflation rate in three decades will help to kill US President Joe Biden's \$1.75 trillion Build Back Better (BBB) act.

[Moore proclaimed that](#) "inflation is resonating with the people" and mused that there is a "50-50 chance" that the bill will be stopped. His optimism centered on West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin voicing concerns over inflation and the effects the spending bill could have on it.

President Joe Biden refuted those concerns, saying in a statement on Wednesday, "17 Nobel Prize winners in economics have said that my plan will "ease inflationary pressures."

Moore has said that "our strategy has been delay, delay, delay," in trying to combat the passage of the bill, adding that measures such as the BBB's child tax credit could prompt the loss of anywhere between six and eight million workers.

[According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), inflation, year over year, is at 6.2%, with the most noticeable increase being in the energy sector.

Inflation has largely been driven by a global shortage in energy, the coronavirus pandemic, and supply chain issues. Opponents of the Build Back Better act appear to be linking inflation to the bill. If that idea takes hold, Build Back Better could face a tough road ahead.

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Former 'Apprentice' Contestant Who Filed Defamation Suit Against Trump Settles Case for \$0
By - Nevin Brown

[All materials](#)

Summer Zervos, a contestant on "The Apprentice," has settled her defamation suit against former US President Donald Trump for \$0.

The defamation suit was dropped on Friday in New York state courts. The suit was initially filed in 2017 but had been frozen due to legal protections afforded to Trump while he was a sitting president.

A December 23 deposition had been scheduled that would have seen both Trump and Zervos testify under oath.

[According to a joint statement made by Zervos' lawyers](#), Beth Wilkinson and Moira Penza, "After five years, Ms. Zervos no longer wishes to litigate against the defendant and has secured the right to speak freely about her experience."

They added, "Ms. Zervos stands by the allegations in her complaint and has accepted no compensation."

In 2016, when Trump was the Republican presidential nominee, Zervos publicly accused Trump of sexual assault and harassment.

Zervos, a restaurateur from California, was a contestant on "The Apprentice" in 2006 while Trump was the host. In 2007, she met with Trump at his New York office and at a hotel in California in what she stated were professional development meetings. According to Zervos, in those meetings, Trump subjected her to unwanted kissing and groping.

Following her allegations, Trump called her claims a "hoax" on social media and claimed that she was a liar trying to upend his presidential campaign. Zervos on the other hand said Trump had tarnished her reputation. She sought an apology, a retraction, and unspecified damages. After Trump was elected president the suit was effectively put on hold. Now, nearly five years later, the suit has been dismissed and settled, with both parties free to talk about the allegations.

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Five Managers Who Could Replace Liverpool's Jurgen Klopp at the Kop
By - Nevin Brown

Jurgen Klopp's reign at Liverpool has solidified his place as one of the greatest managers in history. Since taking over, he's turned Liverpool into a dominant side, captured the club's sixth European title, and won their first Premier League. However, with his contract set to run out in 2024, it's never too early to look for his successor.

Jurgen Klopp took over Liverpool in October of 2015. Over the course of three seasons, he slowly built a side capable of challenging for the biggest trophies in the sport. The culmination of

his efforts came over a two-year period where he won the 2018-19 Champions League and the 2019-20 Premier League titles.

While Klopp has yet to recapture those lofty heights, his side is well-positioned to compete for both the Champions League and Premier League over the next few seasons. The recruitment architect of the Klopp-era, Michael Edwards, has informed the club that he will be stepping down from his post at the end of the season. With Edwards set to depart and Klopp's contract running out in 2024, a golden era at Anfield could be coming to an end.

While it will be impossible for any manager to fully capture what Klopp brought to Liverpool, someone will have to try. These are the five managers that Liverpool could target if Klopp walks away in 2024.

Steven Gerrard

The first name that Liverpool will consider is Steven Gerrard. The newly appointed Aston Villa manager is a Liverpool legend. While hiring former players, regardless of their credentials, has become all the rage, by 2024 Liverpool will know if Gerrard is as good a manager as he was a player.

Gerrard has already proven himself in the Scottish top flight. His time in charge of Rangers saw him end Celtic's run of nine consecutive titles, produce an undefeated season, and finish top of their Europa League group.

Outside of being a club legend, he got his start in managing Liverpool's youth teams. If Gerrard is successful at Aston Villa over the next few seasons, then the Liverpool job is all his.

Thomas Tuchel

Thomas Tuchel is coming off a season where he won the Champions League with Chelsea. Managers with that much success usually don't have to worry about job security. Yet, Chelsea remains an exception to that rule.

There's a great chance that Tuchel will be looking for work in 2024, not because he's a bad manager, but because Chelsea hires and fires managers like a day-trader.

Tuchel is a candidate for the Liverpool managerial job because he has shown a habit of following Jurgen Klopp. He took over Mainz in 2009 right after Klopp departed the club and then did the same thing when Klopp left Borussia Dortmund in 2015. While this could be a coincidence, it wouldn't be a shock if Liverpool came knocking.

Julian Nagelsmann

Jurgen Klopp was a massive hire for Liverpool. Klopp could have had just about any job he wanted, but he chose Liverpool. By 2024, Julian Nagelsmann could be in a similar situation. He looks a lock to win the Bundesliga this season at Bayern Munich and he may add a Champions League as well.

Nagelsmann is both extremely gifted and extremely young. He's only 34, and if he ever becomes available he'll be the most hotly pursued manager in the world. Liverpool would be foolish not to try and lure him to Anfield. The question is, would he come?

If they were able to land Klopp, then they shouldn't have trouble making a spirited pitch to Nagelsmann. Then again, maybe he decides he wants to win the Bundesliga every year with Munich. If Liverpool can sell him on the challenge, he could be a great hire.

Erik ten Hag

What Erik ten Hag is doing at Ajax cannot be overlooked. He has won the Eredivisie twice and this season Ajax have been amongst the best sides in the world. They're tied atop the

Eredivisie, with a +35 goal differential through 12 games, and have been perfect in their Champions League group.

Ten Hag has proven just about everything he can at Ajax, which means he might not be available in 2024. However, if he moves this summer then he could be ready to move again by 2024.

Ten Hag is a manager to watch. If he proves at his next stop that he's the real deal, then he should be one of Liverpool's primary targets.

Graham Potter

Graham Potter has done wonders at Brighton. While his record isn't sublime, he has consistently squeezed performances out of sides with relatively meagre talent.

The best managers turn unknown players into known players and Potter has done that at Brighton. If he continues to have Brighton punch above their weight he'll be managing a big club in no time.

Liverpool likely already have their eyes on him after Brighton tied the Reds 2-2 in a match where they looked their equals. Potter is an excellent coach and in an environment like Liverpool where quality players are the expectation, he should have no trouble challenging for trophies.

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Mark Meadows Ducks Friday Deposition Amid Contempt Threat From Jan. 6 Committee
By - Nevin Brown

Former US President Donald Trump's final chief of staff, Mark Meadows, failed to appear for a scheduled deposition before the House select committee investigating the deadly January 6 Capitol attack.

The deposition was scheduled for 10 a.m. E.T. on Friday. However, after ten minutes of waiting, members of the committee, their staff, investigators, and a stenographer left the room, [sources](#) have since revealed.

The committee previously provided Meadows and his legal team with eight questions that were pertinent to the investigation and set to be discussed at the deposition.

The committee chairman, Representative Bennie Thompson (D-MS), [wrote in a November 11 dated letter](#) that "Mr. Meadows has not produced even a single document in response to the Select Committee's subpoena."

On Thursday, Meadows' attorney suggested that his client would not cooperate with the investigation as the former White House aide invoked executive privilege to deny the congressional investigation of testimony and documents.

His attorney said in a statement, "Mr. Meadows remains under the instructions of former President Trump to respect longstanding principles of executive privilege."

Thompson, in the same letter, asserted that executive privilege does not shield Meadows from cooperating with the investigation, citing case law and US President Joe Biden's belief "that the constitutional protections of executive privilege should not be used to shield information

reflecting an effort to subvert the Constitution itself,...would be at odds with the principles that underlie the privilege.”

Thompson also informed Meadows and his attorneys that “if there are specific questions during that deposition that you believe raise legitimate privilege issues, Mr. Meadows should state them at that time on the record for the Select Committee’s consideration and possible judicial review.”

Thompson concluded the letter by saying that Meadow’s failure to appear at the deposition is willful non-compliance. The former added, “Such willful noncompliance with the subpoena would force the Select Committee to consider invoking the contempt of Congress procedures in 2 U.S.C. §§ 192, 194—which could result in a referral from the House of Representatives to the Department of Justice for criminal charges.”

A threat of legal action has also been brought against former Trump senior adviser Steve Bannon for his refusal to testify and provide documents to the committee.

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Sharks Are Once Again Swimming in London's River Thames After Undergoing Ecological Revival

By - Nevin Brown

Parts of London’s River Thames were once so polluted that areas became biologically dead. Through conservation and environmental protection, the river has come back to life. Now tope, starry smooth-hound, and spurdog sharks have all been sighted in the river.

The Zoological Society of London’s [State of the Thames report](#), suggests that the once highly-polluted river is in the midst of an ecological revival. The river has seen improvements in its dissolved oxygen and phosphorus levels, as well as improvements in bird and marine mammal populations.

The report did find that nitrate levels and fish populations were headed in the wrong direction and that climate change posed a significant risk to life, both flora and fauna. The increase in nitrates stems in part from agricultural runoff and can significantly worsen algae blooms.

The report suggests further study is needed to understand the small decline in the fish population. The river has seen the average temperature and sea-level rise due to climate change.

Overall, the report indicates that the Thames is far healthier than back in 1957 when scientists at the Natural History Museum declared certain areas of the river biologically dead. From that low point, the Thames has been making a slow comeback.

The identification of sharks in the river is a sign of improved environmental health, indicating that the environment and thus the food chain is currently healthy enough to support an apex predator.

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Meadows Refuses to Cooperate With Jan. 6 Committee as House Panel Files Contempt Threat
By - Nevin Brown

Last month, the US House of Representatives voted to hold former Trump adviser Steve Bannon in criminal contempt of Congress for refusing to cooperate with a probe into the 6 January events.

Mark Meadows, one of the four White House Chiefs of Staff under former US President Donald Trump, has informed the House January 6 committee that he won't cooperate until courts rule on Trump's claim that he is protected by executive privilege.

US President Joe Biden has said he will not extend executive privilege or immunity to those sought after by the House January 6 committee.

[The Biden administration has stated](#) that it does not believe executive privilege protects those who are being investigated under the purview of the January 6 Capitol riot. The administration has further indicated that Trump has asserted those privileges.

[According to the Cornell Law School](#), "Executive privilege is the power of the president and other officials in the executive branch to withhold certain forms of confidential communication from the courts and the legislative branch."

Executive privilege is not unilateral, and a court can determine its applicability. The United States v. Nixon set the precedent that the president is legally required to provide evidence of their communications with their aides if the information is related to a criminal case.

"Contrary to decades of consistent bipartisan opinions from the Justice Department that senior aides cannot be compelled by Congress to give testimony, this is the first president to make no effort whatsoever to protect presidential communications from being the subject of compelled testimony," George Terwilliger, an attorney for Meadows, said [in a statement](#).

"Mr. Meadows remains under the instructions of former President Trump to respect longstanding principles of executive privilege. It now appears the courts will have to resolve this conflict."

Meadows was with Trump on January 6 and investigators have sought details over his communications with the former president, the Justice Department, and the organizers of the deadly rally.

Meadows was originally subpoenaed in September to produce documents connected to the rally by October 7th, ahead of a deposition to be carried out a week later. However, he was later granted a postponement of the initial subpoena deadline as he was negotiating with committee members.

To date, Meadows has yet to hand over the desired documents.

Shortly after Meadows made it known that he would not be cooperating with the House panel, congressional lawmakers issued a notice threatening to hold Meadows in contempt of Congress if he proceeds in such a manner and fails to appear before his Friday deposition.

The House January 6 Committee used the threat of prosecution when Steve Bannon, who was also subpoenaed back in September, failed to cooperate with the investigation. It remains to be

seen if executive privileges will shield Meadows and Bannon from legal recourse should they decide not to testify, but it does extend their ability to be uncooperative.

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Virginia Teen Believed to Be Behind Bogus Bomb Threats Made Against Multiple US Universities
By - Nevin Brown

Authorities believe that the recent series of bomb threats at prestigious universities in the US northeast was made by a teenager living in Virginia.

It has not been revealed [which threats the 14-year-old teen called in](#), but over the past few weeks there were bomb threats at Yale University, Cornell University, Brown University, Columbia University, and New York University. The University of Southern California also experienced a bomb threat, but it does not appear to be directly linked, according to reports. Each incident required buildings to be evacuated and thoroughly searched by several law enforcement agencies. In each case, no explosives or threat was detected.

Authorities also said separate swatting and bomb threats were made by a group of teens who use the Discord app. The suspects have been linked to at least 30 bomb threats and are between the ages of 13 and 16. None of the threats have been determined to be credible.

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US Likely Buried Details of Syrian Airstrikes Over Shame of Causing Civilian Deaths, Experts Say
By - Evan Craighead

On Saturday, the New York Times published an in-depth look at a series US airstrikes that killed at least 80 people, including up to 64 women and children, near Bāghūz, Syria, on March 18, 2019. The US Central Command, which oversees US air operations in Syria, has since responded to the report and, for the first time, confirmed that it took place.

As the public learns more about the previously unreported US airstrikes in eastern Syria, a number of questions have been raised about the report's timing, the actual casualty count, and possible procedural violations by US military leadership.

Dr. Michele Groppi, a Defense Studies Department lecturer at King's College London and president of ITSS Verona, told Sputnik that it is likely that there was a combination of "overwhelming evidence" and "internal dissent" from personnel who wish to keep the armed forces accountable.

"Generally speaking, when something like this happens, it is because there is a lot of overwhelming evidence," Groppi said in a statement. "There are internal calls within the armed forces for the truth to come out."

The report also comes amid increased US military scrutiny by mainstream media outlets, noted Sami Hamdi, head of the International Interest, a political risk analysis group.

Hamdi highlighted that media coverage of US military actions has intensified following the "chaotic [withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan](#)" in August.

Since then there has been increased media scrutiny of the [US August 29 drone strike](#) that killed Zemari Ahmadi and 9 members of his family in Kabul, Afghanistan, the political analyst said.

"And despite attempts by the US military to justify their actions, the media scrutiny resulted in the matter being referred to the Senate and resulted essentially in the Pentagon having to come out and [admit that they had made the mistake](#) that they had [killed that family by accident](#)," Hamdi said of the Kabul drone strike.

Like the August drone strike, the US failure to immediately admit responsibility in the March 18, 2019, airstrikes in Syria will likely impact the American public's perception of the armed forces. Gene Tate, an evaluator tasked with the case for the inspector general's office, [told the NYT](#) that he believed that he had been forced out of his job after raising concerns about the Pentagon leadership's handling of the 2019 strikes. He noted that the higher-ups "seemed so set on burying this."

Groppi and Hamdi both suggested that the US most likely chose to bury the situation out of natural embarrassment for their error.

"However, especially in a number of Western militaries, this is illegal," qualified Groppi.

While there may be "a tendency to maybe twist or tweak facts," the truth will ultimately come out, he added.

Hamdi pointed out that the situation is particularly humiliating for the US military in Syria because "the US has sought to present Russia and Iran as the evil powers, while it sought to present itself as a knight in shining armour, as a saviour of democratic principles."

CENTCOM has claimed that they were only able to identify four civilians and 16 Daesh fighters among the 80 killed in the strikes. The force claimed it could not rule out the possibility that the remaining 60 individuals - all women and children - were also militants.

"The reason for this uncertainty is that multiple armed women and at least one armed child were observed in the video, and the exact mixture of armed and unarmed personnel could not be conclusively determined," according to CENTCOM in [a statement to the BBC](#). "Likely, a majority of those killed were also combatants at the time of the strike, however, it is also highly likely that there were additional civilians killed by these two strikes."

While some argue that civilian casualties have been reduced by technology, such cases raise questions about US forces' attempts at harm reduction.

"I don't think it is necessarily a priority to limit civilian casualties, whether it's for the US or indeed any army that is operating in the region," Hamdi told Sputnik. "I do think that some steps are taken by the US Army and primarily to ensure that there are no PR disasters that might impact the ability of the White House to maintain its military abroad."

Groppi contended that even if you have the legal grounds to strike a target, you'd likely harm civilians. He said that it is up to armies to find a balance between using surgical airstrikes and putting boots on the ground.

"But as far as now, we're still confronted with civilian casualties and, unfortunately, some even potential attempts to cover this up," Groppi said.

As for the continued illegal presence of the US in Syria, Hamdi noted that, in recent years, there has become a resignation that both Iran and Russia have "rescued" Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

"I do think the US military presence has been winding down in recent years and will continue to wind down in the years to come more or perhaps even in months to come," Hamdi said.

Groppi expressed doubt about the US ending its presence in Syria anytime soon. He said that while there is a pivot to Asia and the Pacific theater, the US has regional stability obligations to honor.

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Trump Organization Reportedly Reaches \$375 Million Deal to Sell Rights to DC Hotel

By - Evan Craighead

Back in 2012, the Trump Organization and a private equity firm were selected by the General Services Administration (GSA) to redevelop the Old Post Office and Clock Tower in northwest Washington, DC. The property, home to the Trump International Hotel since 2016, served as a hotspot for then-US President Donald Trump's campaign-related events.

CGI Merchant Group - an investment firm based in Miami, Florida - is set to acquire the rights to the Trump International Hotel for an estimated \$375 million, the [Wall Street Journal reported on Sunday](#).

Citing individuals familiar with the matter, the report detailed that CGI Merchant Group also secured a deal with Hilton Worldwide Holdings, Inc. to rebrand the DC hotel and remove the former US president's family name from the property.

The Hotel Waldorf-Astoria Corporation - a Hilton Worldwide Holdings subsidiary - will reportedly be tasked with managing the property.

The \$375 million deal is expected to close in the first quarter of 2022.

News of the sale comes a month after the [US House Committee on Oversight and Reform claimed](#) that newly-obtained GSA documents raised "new and troubling questions" about the Trump Organization's lease.

The committee claimed in an [October issuance to the GSA](#) that then-President Trump reported that he earned more than \$150 million in revenue during his White House tenure, but GSA records showed that the Trump International Hotel incurred net losses of more than \$70 million during that period.

Additionally, records showed that Trump's DJT Holdings LLC loaned the DC-based hotel \$27,805,069 between 2017 to 2020. However, only a portion was repaid, causing more than \$24 million of that to be converted to capital contributions.

"Taken together, these documents show that far from being a successful investment, the Trump Hotel was a failing business saddled by debt that required bailouts from President Trump's other businesses," the Democratic-led group said.

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Israel Denies Espionage Charge Against Couple Arrested for Snapping, Sharing Pics of Erdogan's Home

By - Evan Craighead

On Friday, a Turkish court ruled that Israeli nationals Mody and Natali Oknin must remain in custody for an extra 20 days after allegedly photographing Erdogan's home. The order came as a shock to some, as they presumed the couple would simply be deported back to their home in Modi'in, Israel.

Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett asserted in a Sunday statement that Natali and Mody Oknin "do not work for any Israeli agency."

"The most senior echelons in Israel dealt with this issue throughout the weekend, led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and will continue to work tirelessly with the aim of finding a solution as soon as possible," Bennett said.

Israel's president, Isaac Herzog, and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid have both issued statements proclaiming the Oknins were not affiliated with any Israeli intelligence agency.

However, Turkish prosecutors have argued that the couple was not in Istanbul on an "innocent trip," as claimed by the defense. Lawyers citing a rep in the Turkish prosecutor's office claimed the couple was conducting espionage when they photographed the Turkish president's home from Camlica Tower.

The photos of Erdogan's quarters were then sent to a third party. The defense claims the pictures were sent to family members, and were sent without knowledge that such an act is illegal in Turkey.

Turkish media has reported that a Turkish national was also arrested alongside the couple.

[The arrest](#) came about a month after Turkish [authorities arrested 15 alleged Mossad agents](#) in a covert operation. At the time, the Daily Sabah newspaper published the suspects' mugshots and an interview in which one arrestee claimed to have been unwittingly recruited by Israel's national intelligence agency.

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White House Reportedly 'Worn Out' by Harris Camp as Aides Claim Biden is Sidelining VP

By - Evan Craighead

Last week, a USA Today-Suffolk University poll found that 28% of US voters approve of the vice president's work, while a whopping 51% of those surveyed disapprove of Harris' efforts. US President Joe Biden's approval rating also plummeted to a new low of 38%, with 58% of respondents disapproving the performance of the president.

Tensions between the West Wing and the Harris camp are reportedly at an all-time high, according to a [new CNN report by Edward-Isaac Dove and Jasmine Wright](#) that provides a behind-the-scenes look at what has been described as chaos and dysfunction in the Biden-Harris administration.

Key West Wing aides communicated to the outlet that they are worn out by Harris and her camp amid a [frenzy of public criticism](#) and an approval rating worse than that of the US president. Meanwhile, some of those who defended Harris' position asserted that they believe she has been placed in a losing situation, likening the sidelining to a recent satirical article from The Onion: ["White House Urges Kamala Harris To Sit At Computer All Day In Case Emails Come Through."](#)

The Sunday report was compiled based on interviews with White House aides, as well as nearly three dozen former and current aides of Harris, Biden administration officials, Democratic operatives, political donors, and outside advisers.

Despite Harris being a "heartbeat away" from the presidency, a number of sources - including a top donor to Biden - have claimed that the vice president has been placed in a position that could be damaging for the future of the party and, more importantly, the country as a whole. "You should be putting her in positions to succeed, as opposed to putting weights on her," a top Democratic donor told CNN. "If you did give her the ability to step up and help her lead, it would strengthen you and strengthen the party."

Some suspect Harris may have been appointed to deal with the Northern Triangle diplomacy as an attempt to dash any future presidential aspirations. One former, high-level aide noted that the White House was "consistently sending [Harris] out there on losing issues."

Those in Harris' camp also made reference to how the White House was quick to come to the defense of US Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, [who received backlash after being granted paternity leave](#), but appeared laissez-faire when it came to media criticism of the vice president.

"It's hard to miss the specific energy that the White House brings to defend a white man, knowing that Kamala Harris has spent almost a year taking a lot of the hits that the West Wing didn't want to take themselves," a former Harris aide told CNN, recounting an October conversation with several ex- and current aides.

At the same time, the report claimed that one overarching belief is that the vice president's staffers have repeatedly failed her and that Harris appears to be influenced predominantly by family members, like sister Maya Harris, brother-in-law Tony West, and niece Meena Harris. The latter issue has been addressed in recent months, according to several sources familiar with operations in Harris' office.

Both the White House and the Harris camp have since issued responses to the report, with the latter panning it as "gossip."

"It is unfortunate that after a productive trip to France in which we reaffirmed our relationship with America's oldest ally and demonstrated US leadership on the world stage, and following passage of a historic, bipartisan infrastructure bill that will create jobs and strengthen our

communities, some in the media are focused on gossip - not on the results that the President and the Vice President have delivered," said Symone Sanders, chief spokesperson and a senior adviser to Harris.

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Jan. 6 Committee to 'Move Very Quickly' in Referring Meadows for Criminal Contempt - Schiff
By - Nevin Brown

Representative Adam Schiff (D-CA), a member of the House Select Committee investigating the January 6 attack on the US Capitol, said on Sunday that the committee could soon refer former White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows for criminal contempt.

[In an interview with NBC's "Meet the Press,"](#) Schiff spoke on the struggles the committee has faced, especially in regards to issued subpoenas against officials who took part in the Trump administration.

Meadows and Trump ally Steve Bannon, both deemed key witnesses in the deadly January 6 Capitol riot, have refused to cooperate with the committee's investigation. Bannon has [already been indicted](#) on charges of criminal contempt, and Meadows could soon be facing charges himself.

"I'm confident we'll move very quickly with respect to Mr. Meadows also, but we want to make sure that we have the strongest possible case to present to the Justice Department and for the Justice Department to present to a grand jury," Meadows remarked during his weekend appearance.

"But when ultimately witnesses decide, as Meadows has, that they're not even going to bother showing up, that they have that much contempt for the law, then it pretty much forces our hand and we'll move quickly."

The January 6 committee appears to be using contempt of Congress charges only as a last resort.

When asked if he would consider limited immunity for testimony, Schiff remarked that it would "have to be made on a case by case basis."

"I certainly wouldn't want to prevent the Justice Department from prosecuting people who committed criminal conduct, for example on January 6, by giving them immunity to testify before our committee," he said.

With Bannon set to turn himself in on Monday, the January 6 committee will get its first response to the effectiveness of filing criminal charges as a means of securing evidence and testimony. Schiff's Sunday commentary comes days after the House panel [warned](#) that a no-show would lead to him being found in contempt of Congress after he refused to appear for his Friday deposition.

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'I Keep Forgetting You're Still Alive': Musk Taunts Sanders After He Urges Rich to Pay 'Fair Share'

By - Nevin Brown

Elon Musk's reply to a Bernie Sanders tweet has caused quite a stir on social media after the tech entrepreneur remarked that he simply keeps "forgetting" that the independent lawmaker is "still alive."

In response to a Sanders' tweet suggesting that the "extremely wealthy pay their fair share," Musk delivered a snark-riddled reply by stating, "I keep forgetting you're still alive."

Although Sanders did not directly reply to the barb, Musk followed up the tweet with another, reading, "Want me to sell more stock, Bernie? Just say the word..."

The tech CEO and the progressive senator's dispute goes back to Sanders' support for a 'billionaire tax' that would tax unrealized capital gains. Currently, only realized capital gains are taxed.

Musk doesn't receive a salary from Tesla but instead is compensated with stock options. What this means is that as Musk's net worth increases through his holding of Tesla stocks, he doesn't have to pay taxes on unrealized capital gains even as his overall wealth increases.

Musk appears to be making a point to Sanders and the so-called 'billionaire tax' through the former's decision to sell a sizable chunk of his Tesla stock. In a Twitter poll that Musk personally conducted earlier in the week, he asked followers if he should sell Tesla stock. Thus far, Musk has reportedly sold close to \$7 billion of the automaker stock, at current rates.

The sale of Tesla stock, which are realized capital gains, are taxable under the current American tax code. However, there are two distinct brackets of capital gains, [long-term and short-term capital gains](#). Long-term capital gains are from the sale of stock held for more than a year and short-term capital gains are from the sale of stock held for under a year.

If Musk is selling stock he has held for more than a year, it will be taxed at a 0%, 15%, or 20% rate, depending on his tax bracket. If the stock hasn't been held for a year, then it is taxed at the same rate as income would be, depending on the seller's tax bracket.

Tesla is currently [valued at over a trillion dollars](#) and [Musk's net worth is estimated to be \\$271.8 billion](#). Through Musk's sale of \$7 billion worth of Tesla stock, he will likely be taxed at either 20%, if they're long-term capital gains, or 37% if they're short-term capital gains.

Even with Musk's massive sell-off of stock, it's probable that Sanders will point out that Musk still is not paying his fair share. Musk might have forgotten that Sanders is "still alive," but if a 'billionaires tax' is passed, Musk will remember his existence in a hurry.

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Countdown to 2022: Four Factors That Could Flip the US Senate

By - Nevin Brown

The 2022 midterm elections in the US will see 34 Senate seats up for grabs. Control of the Senate, currently split 50-50 between Republicans and Democrats, will hinge on which party is able to hold or flip the most seats. Here are four factors that could swing control of the senate. Of the 34 senate seats up for grabs in 2022, [only eight are projected to be tightly contested races](#). With apologies to Republicans and Democrats in the 26 other states, barring an unforeseen occurrence, those seats will remain in the incumbent party's hands.

The vulnerable seats that Democrats control are in Nevada, Arizona, Georgia, and New Hampshire, and the vulnerable Republican seats are in Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and Florida. If each party holds, the Senate will remain locked at 50-50, with US Vice President Kamala Harris as the tiebreaker.

[An ABC News/Washington Post poll](#) published on Sunday shows that Republicans are in a position to make significant gains in Congress in the 2022 midterms. If elections were held today, 51% of respondents said they would vote Republican, opposed to 40% who said they would vote for a Democrat.

The early indicators look rosy for Republican candidates, but with a year until Election Day, a lot can change. It should be noted, the House is much more responsive than the Senate to broader national trends.

These are the four factors that will determine if Republicans can flip the Senate in their favor:
History

Throughout American history, [the party of the president has consistently lost seats](#) in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. However, Senate races more commonly buck that trend. Post-WWII, there have been five instances where the president's party has added seats in the Senate and one where there was no net change.

Over that same span, the president's party lost, on average, 3.8 seats in the Senate per midterm election. For Republicans to hit the midterm average, they would need to retain Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and Florida and then take each of Nevada, Arizona, Georgia, and New Hampshire.

Expecting Republicans to do that is a tall task, but with the Senate in a deadlock, a single-seat advantage is all that is needed.

Joe Biden's Popularity

A president's popularity can make or break a Senate candidate. As noted, midterm elections usually see the president's party suffer losses in the House and the Senate. Voters are not just selecting someone who will represent them in Washington, they're selecting someone who will help or hinder the president's agenda.

Based upon current polling, Democratic candidates should be worried about their chances. [According to FiveThirtyEight](#), 51.4% of Americans disapprove of Joe Biden, while 42.8% approve.

There is still plenty of time for Biden to rebound. In March, he held a 55% approval rating, compared to a 39.1% disapproval rating. There is plenty of time for Biden's popularity to sink further, however.

Outside of New Hampshire, each Senate seat hanging in the balance is in a state that was highly competitive in the 2020 Presidential election. Nevada was decided by 2.4 points, Arizona 0.4, Wisconsin 0.6, Georgia 0.3, and Pennsylvania 1.2.

Democrats must see Biden become more popular to retain their Senate seats in Nevada, Arizona, and Georgia.

Democratic Legislation

The midterm elections could come down to the passing and popularity of Democratic bills. In a reductive sense, bills are what senators do. If voters like the bills a party is passing then that party has a chance to grow its base of support.

The popularity of the infrastructure bill could play a significant role in who controls the Senate. Another wild card is how quickly the Build Back Better act is passed, and how will Americans react to it?

Democrats holding power makes them an easy target, but it also gives them a platform to make policy. If the policy takes a hit, it could bolster the chances of their opponents.

If the legislation is a dud, or it is difficult for voters to see the impact, then it could cause them to lose ground. The Democrats have a year to sell Americans on their vision for the country, while Republicans use that time to show how they're failing.

Post-Trump Gameplan

Former US President Donald Trump's political legacy continues to loom over American politics, with Democrats using him to generate fear, and Republicans using him to spur enthusiasm.

How will the parties navigate a post-Trump political landscape in which some Republican candidates lean all in on the rhetoric, and bombast that powered Trump to the presidency in 2016?

Others try to thread the needle of appealing to Trump's base, but shy away from the attributes that alienated voters in the suburbs, which ultimately cost him the 2020 election.

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Wild World of World Cup Qualification: How the 32 Field Will Get to Qatar

By - Nevin Brown

The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar will be the first World Cup held in the Arab world - and in the winter. It will also be the final World Cup with 32 teams, but which 32 teams still remains a question.

Some nations have already qualified for the event, but far more still need to produce performances to play on the world's largest stage. At the moment, Serbia, Spain, France, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Croatia, and Brazil have punched their tickets to Qatar, but that leaves 24 open spots.

Qualifying for the World Cup is as magical for some nations as winning it is for others. However, the qualification process is far from straightforward. Each continent has its own football federation that has its own qualification rules.

The 2022 World Cup is only a year away. Here is a breakdown of the qualification standards of each confederation, who looks poised to qualify, and who has work to do.

UEFA: 13 Automatic Qualifiers

UEFA qualification is a convoluted mess - the final round of qualification splits 55 teams into 10 groups, five groups of five, and five groups of six. Each team plays a home and away contest against their group mates, with the top team in each group gaining automatic qualification for the World Cup.

Group play garners ten qualifiers, with the final three coming from a 12-team playoff. Each group runner-up heads to the playoff and the top two Nations League points earners that did not finish first or second in their group also join the playoff. Those 12 teams are drawn into three four-team groups that play single-elimination games to determine the three UEFA playoff qualifiers.

Group A is all done and dusted - Serbia took the top spot by beating Portugal 2-1. As for Portugal, the team is headed to the UEFA playoffs. Spain won group B and Sweden came in second.

Group C has one more match week and it will be must-see television. Italy and Switzerland are tied atop the group with 15 points. Switzerland plays Bulgaria and Italy plays Northern Ireland. Italy is currently top of the group due to their superior goal difference.

Group D has no drama at the top, as France have already qualified, but second place and a spot in the playoff is still up for grabs. With one match to be played, Finland has 11 points and Ukraine has 9 points. Finland plays France and Ukraine plays Bosnia and Herzegovina to wrap up group play.

Group E has been settled for all intents and purposes. Belgium have already won it and Wales and the Czech Republic have both qualified for the playoff. The pair, due to their Nations League standing, will make the playoff if they finish second or third in the group.

Group F, the first of five six team groups, is also drama-free. With one game to go, Denmark has already qualified for the World Cup, Scotland are locked into a playoff spot, and Austria will qualify for the playoff through their Nations League performance.

Group G is set to have the most exciting final matchday. The Netherlands lead the group with 20 points, but Turkey and Norway are hot on their heels with 18. Norway plays the Netherlands and Turkey play Montenegro on the final day. Norway need a win to top the group or make the playoff, the Netherlands can top the group with a tie due to their significant advantage in goal differential, and Turkey are in the current playoff spot from a single goal edge in goal differential over Norway and have the easiest opponent.

Group H has played all of its matches. Croatia topped the group and Russia finished in second.

Group I has already sorted out who will finish first and second, but, with one match to go, it has yet to determine the order. England currently tops the group with 23 points and Poland sits in second with 20. England currently has a +26 goal differential compared to Poland's +20 and play San Marino. England could end up in the playoff, but it would take an extraordinary upset and Poland dismantling Hungary.

Group J has played all of its matches and was topped by Germany, with North Macedonia finishing second.

CONMEBOL: 4 Automatic Qualifiers

CONMEBOL is more straightforward than UEFA. Qualification goes through a single ten team group. Each nation plays each other home and away, and the top four teams qualify for the World Cup while the fifth-place team heads to the Inter-Confederation Playoff.

Each team will play 18 matches and after only 12, Brazil has qualified with 34 points. Argentina sits in second with 28 points and have very nearly punched their ticket to Qatar.

After Brazil and Argentina, things get more interesting. Ecuador are on 20 points, Chile, Colombia, and Uruguay are on 16, and Peru are on 14. Only two of these teams will get automatic qualification to the World Cup and a third will go to the Inter-Confederation Playoff. Brazil and Argentina have only played 12 matches, but everyone else has played 13. Ecuador are in a good position to qualify, but one of Colombia, Chile, and Uruguay will be left on the outside looking in. For those three nations, they're already in a five-game World Cup qualification playoff.

With the way CONMEBOL is set up, just about every World Cup misses out on at least one very strong South American side and this round of qualification looks no different.

CONCACAF: 3 Automatic Qualifiers

The final round of CONCACAF qualification has an eight team group that plays home and away matches. The top three teams automatically qualify for the World Cup, while the fourth-place team goes to the Inter-Confederation Playoff.

CONCACAF qualification is halfway completed. The US and Mexico are atop the group with 14 points, Canada is in third with 13, and Panama is in fourth with 11. Costa Rica, Jamaica, and El Salvador are on 6 points and Honduras is bottom of the group with 3 points.

The United States, Mexico, and Canada should end up with the top three spots. Panama could sneak into the top three, but it's more likely that the fight for fourth is between Panama and whoever between Costa Rica, Jamaica, and El Salvador make a surge. If one of the US, Mexico, or Canada end up with the Inter-Confederation Playoff, it will be an unmitigated disaster.

CAF: 5 Automatic Qualifiers

CAF is absolutely brutal and could see strong squads miss out on the World Cup entirely. CAF is wrapping up the second round of qualification with a third round scheduled for March 2022. The second round of qualification has ten four-team groups that play each other home and away. The winners of each group enter the third round, where they are drawn against another group winner and play a home and away two-legged affair to determine the five nations who advance to the World Cup.

Mali, Egypt, Morocco, DR Congo, Senegal, and Ghana have already won their group and advanced to the third round. Groups A, B, C, and D will come down to the final matchday. Group A is currently topped by Algeria with 13 points and Burkina Faso in second with 11 points. Fortunately for the casual observer, they play each other in a winner take all contest on the final matchday. Burkina Faso needing a win should make it a high-flying affair.

Group B has a deadlock at the top. Both Tunisia and Equatoria Guinea are on 10 points. Unfortunately, they do not play each other on the final day, but Tunisia play Zambia who has 7 points and Equatoria Guinea play Mauritania who have 1 point. There's a route for Zambia to top the group, but this final matchday should be incredibly exciting.

Group C is topped by Nigeria on 12 points with Cape Verde in second on 10 points. Bless the scheduling gods down in CAF, because Nigeria and Cape Verde play each other on the final matchday. Nigeria certainly has the edge, but Cape Verde played them close in their first encounter.

Group D is topped by Ivory Coast with 13 points and Cameroon is in second with 12. The two nations are set to play each other on the final matchday as well. Both sides have incredibly talented rosters and if they weren't in the same group they both could have qualified for the World Cup.

AFC: 4 Automatic Qualifiers + Qatar

AFC has the added bonus of having Qatar automatically qualify for the World Cup through hosting the event. The federation is in its final round of qualification. 12 teams are broken into two six team groups with the top two teams in each group gaining automatic qualification and the third-place teams playing in a single-elimination match to go to the Inter-Confederation Playoff.

AFC qualification is only halfway completed but Iran and South Korea in Group A look like locks to punch their tickets to Qatar. Iran has 13 points and South Korea has 11, but the third-place team Lebanon are on 5 points.

Group B is currently topped by Saudi Arabia with 13 points, Australia is in second on 10 points, Japan is in third with 9 points, and Oman is in fourth on 7 points. The fight for seeding in Group B looks to be incredibly competitive. Whoever finishes third in Group B will be the favorite to advance to the Inter-Confederation Playoff.

OFC: 0 Automatic Qualifiers

OFC, due to the coronavirus pandemic, has yet to play any qualification matches. The federation doesn't have a single automatic World Cup qualification spot. The winner of their qualification process gets to play in the Inter-Confederation Playoff.

OFC qualification is set to be played at a neutral site where the 11 nations break into two groups and play each team a single time. The group winners will then play a two-legged home and away contest with the winner securing entry into the Inter-Confederation Playoff.

Inter-Confederation Playoff: 2 Automatic Qualifiers

The Inter-Confederation Playoff has four teams vying for two spots at the World Cup. The four participants are the top team from OFC, the fourth-place team in CONCACAF qualification, the fifth-place team in CONMEBOL qualification, and the winner of the AFC third-place clash.

The four teams will be drawn against one team for a home and away clash to determine who goes to the World Cup. Whoever comes from CONMEBOL will be favored to advance. If the third-place side from AFC avoids a CONMEBOL side, they should have a good shot to make it to Qatar.

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US Department of Homeland Security Starts Program to Recruit Cyber Talent

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) – The US Department of Homeland Security said on Monday that it is launching an innovative new program to hire and develop world-class cyber talent to protect critical infrastructure.

"Today, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) launched the Cybersecurity Talent Management System (CTMS), a new personnel system that will enable DHS to more effectively recruit, develop, and retain our Nation's top cybersecurity professionals," the statement read. The personnel hired through this system will work at the new DHS Cybersecurity Service, which is in charge of protecting US critical infrastructure and the American people from cybersecurity threats.

Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas noted that new circumstances require additional innovative tools of hiring employees. "This new system will enable our Department to better compete for cybersecurity professionals and remain agile enough to meet the demands of our critical cybersecurity mission," he said.

The CTMS will be initially used to fill high-priority jobs at the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) and the DHS Office of the Chief Information Officer. Starting 2022, the system will be available across several DHS agencies with a cybersecurity mission, the statement added.

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Blinken Welcomes Release of American Journalist From Prison in Myanmar – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - US State Secretary Antony Blinken has welcomed the release of American reporter Daniel Fenster from prison in Myanmar, the State Department said on Monday.

"We welcome the release of American journalist Daniel Fenster from prison in Burma, where he was wrongfully detained for almost six months. I commend Ambassador Tom Vajda and his team at U.S. Embassy Rangoon, Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs Roger Carstens, the expertise of Consular Affairs and the dedicated partners, including Governor Bill Richardson, who helped facilitate Danny's release," Blinken said.

He added that he was glad that Daniel would soon be reunited with his family.

The State Department continues to call for the release of others who remain imprisoned in Myanmar, the statement added.

Earlier in the day, the Richardson Center which promotes international peace and dialogue by addressing specific conflicts announced that former US Ambassador to the UN Bill Richardson had managed to secure the release of the American reporter.

"Danny's release was secured following a private humanitarian visit by Governor Richardson to Myanmar and face-to-face negotiations with General Min Aung Hlaing, Myanmar's Commander in Chief," the center tweeted.

Fenster, 37, worked as the managing editor of the Frontier Myanmar news magazine. He was detained on May 24 at Yangon International Airport before he could board a plane to leave the country.

Media reported in June that Fenster appeared before a special court in Yangon's Insein Prison to face charges under a law that criminalizes encouraging dissent against the Myanmar military.

On February 1, the military seized control of Myanmar in a coup, which prompted nationwide protests. The military justified their action by alleged election fraud blamed on civilian government leaders and promised to transfer power after new elections are held.

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US Removal of Ethiopia From Free Trade Deal Likely to Worsen Crisis - Ethiopian Ambassador

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - Washington's decision to remove Ethiopia from the list of beneficiaries under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), which gives access to duty-free trade, could adversely affect the livelihood of 200,000 workers, mostly women, Ambassador to the United States Fitsum Arega told Sputnik.

"Ethiopia is grateful for the AGOA privilege. We have been really attracting foreign investors from the US, Europe and Asia. Because of AGOA, some 200,000 plus people, mostly women, have got direct and indirect jobs for the first time in their lives. These rural women who have kids, and taking away this meager income will put them in a life and death situation. So, this will never help at all. It will worsen the humanitarian situation in Ethiopia," he said.

When asked whether he had a chance to discuss the issue with anyone in the American administration, Arega said that the US had just informed the country of the decision.

"There was no discussion. They informed us, but it's not a discussion. AGOA's arrangement is like a gift from Congress to Africa & doesn't allow negotiation," he noted.

The AGOA move and other legislative measures in Congress have given the impression to the Ethiopian people that the US is taking action to hurt Ethiopia and support the TPLF, according to the diplomat.

"So, if we add it all up, there was an executive order, resolutions by Congress and other actions in the media to pressure Ethiopia. All these pressures are aimed at breaking the Ethiopian will and that is how most Ethiopians see the situation. This is the perception I clearly communicated this to the representatives," Arega said.

Arega pointed out that such restrictive measures could worsen the humanitarian situation.

"The people of Ethiopia have been affected by COVID-19, by flood, locust swarms, conflict, drought and now AGOA and other restrictions. The people deserve fairness and support," he said.

Northern Ethiopia has been engulfed by an internal conflict since November of last year, when the central government accused the TPLF of attacking a military base. Earlier this month, the country declared a six-month state of emergency nationwide as TPLF rebels threatened to advance on the capital of Addis Ababa.

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Ethiopia Calls on UN to Condemn Terrorism in Country - Diplomat

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - The Ethiopian government is calling on the United Nations to condemn the "terrorism" of TPLF rebels in the country, Ambassador of Ethiopia to the United States, Fitsum Arega, told Sputnik.

The UN Security Council has recently held a special meeting on Ethiopia after which it issued a statement expressing concern over the escalation of fighting in northern Ethiopia and called on all sides to negotiate a lasting ceasefire.

"The United Nations can play a big role. But it must start with respect for Ethiopia's sovereignty and dignity. As a founding member of the UN, Ethiopia deserves universal respect for its territorial integrity and sovereignty as a nation. The UN Security Council must condemn TPLF terrorism. That's the first thing it needs to do. But they have failed to do that," the ambassador added.

Northern Ethiopia has been engulfed by an internal conflict since November of last year, when the central government accused the TPLF of attacking a military base and launched a counter-operation in Tigray.

Earlier this month, the country declared a six-month state of emergency nationwide as TPLF rebels threatened to advance on the capital of Addis Ababa.

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Newly Formed Rebel Alliance to Continue Destabilization of Ethiopia - Diplomat

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - An alliance formed by nine Ethiopian rebel groups in Washington will further contribute to the destabilization of Ethiopia, which has been facing an insurgency by Tigray rebels, Ambassador to the United States Fitsum Arega told Sputnik.

"What they signed is to continue the destabilization by the TPLF. So it's just a continuation of the destabilization, and it has no meaning at all," Arega said.

Nine Ethiopian rebel groups announced on Friday that they had formed an alliance to change the government and establish a transitional body. The alliance, dubbed the United Front of Ethiopian Federalist Forces, comes as Ethiopia was put under a six-month state of emergency after Tigray rebels claimed they are advancing toward the capital of Addis Ababa.

"The individuals who signed the so-called alliance agreement are led by a former TPLF diplomat. There is no evidence the individuals who signed an agreement head any political or military group. With the exception of the TPLF former ambassador, none of the other individuals are known in the Ethiopian community," Arega said. "The group has openly vowed to 'dismantle' the Ethiopian government by 'force or negotiation'."

Arega added that he had asked the State Department about the signed agreement.

"They said they don't know anything about them. They said they learned about them from media reports," the diplomat noted, adding that he finds it "puzzling" that the US government tolerates such a meeting on its soil.

Northern Ethiopia has been engulfed by an internal conflict since November of last year, when the central government accused the TPLF of attacking a military base and launched a counter-operation in Tigray.

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Ethiopia in Open Discussion With State Dept. on Tigray Crisis - Ambassador to US

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - Ethiopian officials are in open discussion with the State Department on the crisis in the northern Tigray region, and are hopeful that Washington will understand the situation on the ground and not equate the two parties in the conflict, Ambassador to the United States Fitsum Arega told Sputnik.

"We have an open discussion with officials in the State Department. We also communicate with special envoy Ambassador [Jeffrey] Feltman. We update the U.S. on current events regularly," Arega said. "There is a mistaken perception that the Ethiopian government and the TPLF are equal political entities to engage in negotiations. That is a mistake. The Ethiopian government is freely elected by the people of Ethiopia. The TPLF is an organization that has vowed to destroy the elected government of Ethiopia."

Arega stressed the need to identify why the conflict started.

"The most fundamental fact is who is responsible for causing the conflict. The tendency to claim both sides are wrong is itself wrong. The TPLF is responsible and must be condemned for its actions in causing the conflict and in extending it into neighboring regions," he argued.

The ambassador noted that some US lawmakers have already stated that they do not support the TPLF. He had recently met with three members of Congress, including House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Gregory Meeks, as well as California Representatives Karen Bass and Barbara Lee.

"I explained to them there is a perception by so many Ethiopians in Ethiopia and in the Diaspora that the US is equating their government with the terrorist TPLF and that is feeding the belief that the US is in support of the TPLF and against Ethiopia," he said.

When asked whether there has been any sign that the US will support the Ethiopian government and designate the TPLF as a terrorist organization, Arega said that "there was no hint except the strong public statement by Representative Karen Bass exposing TPLF's terrorist acts after her visit to Ethiopia."

"The good thing is that we have still an open discussion and that will continue," Arega said. In early November, Ethiopia declared a six-month state of emergency nationwide as TPLF rebels threatened to advance on the capital of Addis Ababa. Northern Ethiopia has been engulfed by an internal conflict since November of last year, when the central government accused the TPLF of attacking a military base and launched a counter-operation in Tigray.

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Ethiopian Ambassador Says Addis Ababa Safe, No Need for Foreign Evacuations

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - Ethiopian Ambassador to the United States Fitsum Arega told Sputnik that the conflict in the northern part of the country has been contained and presents no threat to the capital, which makes foreign evacuations unnecessary.

"Addis Ababa is safe and secure as always. There is no need for alarm. People are living their normal lives. It makes no sense to urge 'evacuations.' What we have seen in other part of the world with people clambering to hold onto planes to make an escape recently is far from occurring in Ethiopia," he said.

Last week, the US urged its citizens in Ethiopia to evacuate immediately, claiming the rebels are on the outskirts of the capital ready to take over. It came after the Ethiopian parliament declared a six-month state of emergency nationwide as TPLF rebels threatened to advance on the capital of Addis Ababa. The development prompted several countries to start evacuating their diplomatic missions.

Washington has ordered all of its non-essential diplomatic staff and their families to leave Ethiopia.

Arega noted that Americans and other foreigners are not rushing to leave the country amid a two-week long general call for evacuation of US citizens by the embassy in Addis Ababa.

"Commercial plane seats are always available but no one is rushing to leave, but the US government trying to convince by every means possible including paying for their airfare but no takers," he said.

Arega stressed that Ethiopia is a big country with 120 million people. "The conflict area we are talking about is limited to the northern part. The large part of the country remains safe as well," he said.

According to Arega, the Ethiopian government has made it clear to the diplomatic corps in Addis Ababa that their safety will be fully ensured.

"The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has made a presentation to the diplomatic community on the declaration of the state of emergency and provided full assurances that they will be accorded full diplomatic protection. It is regrettable that some should try to weaponize fear and alarm as a pressure strategy in aid of the TPLF. But the country will return to normalcy in the foreseeable future," he said.

Northern Ethiopia has been engulfed by an internal conflict since November of last year, when the central government accused the TPLF of attacking a military base and launched a counter-operation in Tigray. Hostilities have since been going on, despite a unilateral ceasefire announced by the government in June.

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Ethiopian Gov't Seeks Return of Some 800 Trucks Sent to Tigray to Deliver Aid - Diplomat

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) – The Ethiopian government demands the return of hundreds of trucks reported missing by international aid organizations after they delivered humanitarian aid to the Tigray region, Ambassador of Ethiopia to the United States Fitsum Arega told Sputnik.

"There were 1,111 aid trucks that entered into Tigray region over three months ago delivering food and other supplies but only 242 have returned. The rest have been commandeered by the TPLF to transport terrorist fighters to neighboring regions. We are still demanding those trucks. It has been more than three months now. They have not been seen," Arega stated.

The diplomat expressed his disappointment that the international community has yet to condemn this action that violates humanitarian law. "it is high time for the international community to take a stand on this and demand the TPLF return the trucks to deliver aid."

In early November, Ethiopia declared a six-month national state of emergency as TPLF rebels threatened to advance upon the capital of Addis Ababa. Northern Ethiopia has been gripped by conflict since November 2020, when the TPLF attacked an Ethiopian federal base in the Tigray region.

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Int'l Aid Groups Focus on Tigray, Neglect Other Struggling Regions – Ethiopian Diplomat

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - Humanitarian organizations are focusing on the Tigray region in Ethiopia failing to provide assistance to other areas, while the government continues to deliver aid there and stands ready to ensure humanitarian access, Ethiopian Ambassador to the United States Fitsum Arega told Sputnik.

"International humanitarian organizations are disproportionately focusing on the Tigray region in Ethiopia and ignoring other neighboring regions suffering from fallout of the Tigray conflict", Arega said. "There is a critical need for food, medicine and shelter aid for the people in Tigray, Amhara and Afar regions. Unfortunately, the aid organizations have paid little attention to meeting the needs of the people equally in all the three regions."

The Ethiopian government, the diplomat noted, is actively working with its partners to provide much-needed humanitarian aid to the people in need amid the conflict spillover to neighboring regions.

"The claim that humanitarian access is being restricted by the government is an unfounded allegation," Arega said.

When asked whether the government is working with the UN and other relief organizations in light of claims of restricted access, Arega said: "The Ethiopian government is willing, able and ready to work with all aid organizations. Indeed, such organizations have free access to do their work with the full support of the government."

Asked about the condition of internally displaced persons, Arega said, "Hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced by the conflict caused by the TPLF. They have lost the lives of family members and they urgently need food, shelter, medicine. They are in dire, serious

condition." He also called on international aid organizations to speed up their efforts in delivering assistance to all areas affected by the conflict.

In early November, Ethiopia declared a six-month national state of emergency to respond to any threats posed by the TPLF or its allied terrorist groups. Northern Ethiopia has been gripped by conflict since November 2020, when the TPLF attacked an Ethiopian federal base in the Tigray region.

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PREVIEW - Blinken on First Trip to Africa as Secretary to Meet With Kenyan, Nigerian Officials

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken during his first trip to Africa this week as the top American diplomat will discuss matters concerning climate change, the novel coronavirus disease pandemic and security challenges in the region, including the unrest in Ethiopia.

"The Secretary will look to advance US-African partnerships and underscore the common values we share with Kenya, Nigeria, and Senegal and use those as platforms to really talk to the entirety of the continent but certainly the publics and leaders in those three countries," US Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of African Affairs Ervin Massinga told reporters last week.

The State Department announced last week that Blinken's trip would run from November 15-18. Blinken will begin his trip in Kenya, where he will meet with President Uhuru Kenyatta and Foreign Minister Raychelle Omamo to discuss mutual interests including collaboration on renewable energy and improving stability in East Africa, including by addressing regional security issues in Ethiopia, Sudan, and Somalia, Massinga said.

Blinken will also meet with key civil society leaders in Kenya and participate in events related to climate and environmental protection, Massinga said.

The US top diplomat will then travel to Nigeria to meet with President Muhammadu Buhari, Vice President Yemi Osinbajo and Foreign Minister Geoffrey Onyeama to discuss expanding energy access to the west African country, security and human rights concerns, economic growth, and improving bilateral cooperation on global health security, Massinga said.

Massinga said Blinken may give an update during the trip about the hold US lawmakers placed on the proposed US military sales to Nigeria due to human rights concerns.

While in Nigeria, the top US diplomat will host a roundtable of entrepreneurs in the digital sector and meet with religious leaders, Massinga said, adding that Blinken is also set to deliver a speech on US-Africa policy.

Blinken will conclude his trip in Senegal with meetings planned with President Macky Sall and Foreign Minister Aissata Tall Sall, Massinga said. Blinken will discuss Sall's upcoming African Union chairmanship and Senegal's role as a democratic, economic, and security leader in West Africa, Massinga said.

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Ethiopians Joining Army Out of Free Will as They See Enormous Threat to Nation – Diplomat

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) – Hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians have volunteered for military service following a national call to defend the country from the rebel Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), Ethiopian Ambassador to the United States Fitsum Arega told Sputnik.

"Ethiopia has no conscription system. The hundreds of thousands who joined the defense forces are all volunteers. Truth be told, the number of volunteers on the waiting list exceeds the number of those who have joined. This is a massive response by Ethiopians from all corners of the country," Arega said.

In early November, the Ethiopian parliament declared a six-month state of emergency nationwide as TPLF rebels threatened to advance upon the capital of Addis Ababa. The declaration allows the government to arrest anyone suspected of cooperating with terrorists. The TPLF has been designated as a terrorist group by the Ethiopian government.

"The TPLF and allied terrorists infiltrate villages and towns and massacre innocent civilians, plunder their properties and kill their cattle. Ethiopians, young and old, men and women and everyone are outraged by the crimes of the terrorists and are determined to defeat and bring them to justice," Arega said. "These terrorists pose an existential threat to all Ethiopians. That is why there is a huge response to join the defense forces."

Northern Ethiopia has been engulfed by an internal conflict since November of last year, when the central government accused the TPLF of attacking a military base and launched a counter operation in Tigray region. Hostilities have since been going on, despite a unilateral ceasefire announced by the government in June.

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Ethiopian Diplomat Says Any Talks With Rebels Possible Only After Disarmament

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - Before talking about negotiations with the government of Ethiopia, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) should disarm, demobilize and turn over those responsible for crimes to face justice, Ethiopian Ambassador to the United States Fitsum Arega told Sputnik.

"The TPLF must completely disarm. We will not let negotiations provide an opportunity for the TPLF to rearm, reorganize and continue their military operations. Demobilization is essential because the people of Tigray who have largely been forced into the conflict because of a few criminal TPLF leaders need to get back to their lives and their families," he said.

The diplomat added that any peace negotiations must include the people of Tigray.

"We do not believe the TPLF in any way represents the people of Tigray. It represents a small clique of individuals who have commoditized the people of Tigray. Any such talks will have to be inclusive of all segments of Tigray society," he stated.

When further questioned if he thought peace talks could actually happen, the ambassador said, "The TPLF has publicly stated numerous times that they are not interested in peace talks, only military victory. The TPLF has no credibility. The government must continue to defend the people and country regardless of the price to be paid".

Northern Ethiopia has been engulfed by an internal conflict since November of last year, when the central government accused the TPLF of attacking a military base and launched a counter-operation in Tigray. Earlier this month, the country declared a six-month state of emergency nationwide as TPLF rebels threatened to advance on the capital of Addis Ababa.

9:10 3. Ethiopians Joining Army Out of Free Will As They See Enormous Threat to Nation – Diplomat

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Ethiopian Diplomat Says Talk of Capital Takeover 'Disinformation,' TPLF Militarily Spent

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - Speculations about the risk of Addis Ababa falling to the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) is disinformation, as the rebels have exhausted their military potential, Ambassador to the United States Fitsum Arega told Sputnik.

"The Ethiopian government is not concerned the TPLF may capture the country's capital. Talk of fall of the capital to the terrorist TPLF is disinformation propagated by the terrorists themselves and their global supporters," he said. "TPLF is militarily spent."

In early November, Ethiopia declared a six-month state of emergency nationwide to protect the population from the rebels, who claim to be advancing on the capital. This development prompted several countries to start evacuating their diplomatic missions.

"As a government, we are responsible for the peace, stability and maintenance of law and order in the country. We are using our resources to make sure terrorism will not succeed in Ethiopia. The capital is in no danger of terrorist takeover because the people of Ethiopia are united and determined to repel any aggression by the terrorists and their supporters. Our people will never submit to terrorist rule," Arega stressed.

Arega drew a comparison between the TPLF attack on the Northern Command in November 2020, which sparked the current conflict, and the Southern American rebel attack on Fort Sumter, South Carolina in 1861.

"A similar event happened at the onset of the American Civil War. During the attack on Fort Sumter, President Abraham Lincoln had no option but to defend the Constitution and to keep the United States united. That is exactly what the Ethiopian government did. Defend the country's constitution against an attack aimed at dismantling the country. Like Lincoln, the Ethiopian government sought to accommodate the threat to its sovereignty and territorial integrity by balancing the needs and safety of its citizens. That is why the government declared a unilateral ceasefire which the TPLF used as a springboard to attack neighboring regions," Arega said.

Northern Ethiopia has been engulfed by an internal conflict since November of last year, when the central government accused the TPLF of attacking a military base and launched a counter-operation in Tigray. Hostilities have been going on since despite a June ceasefire.

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RPT - Texas Oil Regulator Says Increased Regulation on Energy Sector Will Increase Gas Prices

SAN ANTONIO, November 12 (Sputnik) - Increased regulation of the oil and gas industry may drive prices up for the foreseeable future, Texas regulator Jim Wright told Sputnik.

"As regulation and our priorities become what impacts fossil fuels is having on our environment, you're going to see that price is probably going to continue to grow," Wright said on the margins of the US-Mexico Natural Gas Forum.

Wright, who serves as a commissioner on the Texas Railroad Commission, which regulates the state's oil production, said that he is discouraged by the current conditions in the oil and gas market and would like to see it where consumers can afford costs relevant to their paychecks. "Hopefully we can start steering in that direction where we can have stability and it stays within a price that people can afford throughout the world," Wright said.

Wright added that oil and gas producers around the world are trying to make up for pandemic-induced losses and the Biden administration's anti-American energy policies have played some part in the current spike in energy costs.

Nearly two years since the start of the pandemic, pent-up demand has created an oil supply crisis which has sent crude prices skyrocketing from below \$49 per barrel at the end of last year to above \$80 at present, according to the West Texas Intermediate benchmark.

President Joe Biden aims to trim carbon emissions and set the United States on a path to have a carbon neutral economy by 2050. However, with increasing gasoline prices in the United States, Biden has been trying to convince the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to increase oil production but his request has been rejected. Meanwhile, he refuses to tap into the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve claiming it would have a minimal effect on prices at the pump.

Earlier this month, Biden's Environmental Protection Agency announced it intends to limit the methane emissions from some one million oil and gas rigs in the United States.

Moreover, during the United Nations climate change summit this month, more than a hundred countries vowed to cut 30 percent of global methane emissions by 2030.

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"That's certainly part of what's driven that price up and I don't think the current administration, the Biden administration, recognizes some of those actions that he's done here in the past and what that's really done to the consumer," Wright said on the margins of the US-Mexico Natural Gas Forum.

Wright, who serves as a commissioner on the Texas Railroad Commission, which regulates the state's oil production, said President Joe Biden's decision to revoke a key permit in the Keystone XL pipeline project was very harmful to the industry.

"That oil is going to continue to come to Texas because we have to have that oil for our blend to make that product and now it's still coming on truck, rail and ship," Wright said. "I'm more concerned about environmental impacts in those regards than I would be with an underground pipeline."

Wright added that Biden's decision to temporarily pause oil and gas leases on federal land also did not help.

Some of the decisions Biden made may have been driven by lobbyists from the renewable energy sector, which is a strong force, Wright said.

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However, in September, the White House approved the lease of 78 million acres of offshore drilling in the Gulf of Mexico, which is reportedly the largest offshore oil and gas auction in American history.

Overall, US oil and gas producers are feeling uneasy about the Biden administration's anti-American energy policies, Wright said.

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RPT - Oil, Gas Investors Uneasy About More Federal Restrictions on Industry - Texas Regulator

SAN ANTONIO, November 12 (Sputnik) - US oil and gas investors are nervous about looming federal regulations that will impact America's energy sector, Texas industry regulator Jim Wright told Sputnik.

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Biden aims to trim carbon emissions and set the United States on a path to have a carbon neutral economy by 2050. However, with increasing gasoline prices in the United States, Biden has been trying to convince Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to increase oil production - but his request has been rejected.

"I do think that Wall Street is starting to recognize more that fossil fuel is going to be part of our future for a long time to come," Wright said. "When you look at resources that come from wind and solar and those that are being promoted today, they're all great resources but they need to be on a level playing field with fossil fuel."

The national average for a gallon of regular gasoline in the United States is \$3.41, according to the American Automobile Association (AAA). The highest national average on record for regular gasoline is \$4.11 for a gallon in July 2008, data from AAA showed.

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RPT - Oil Producers Worldwide Seeking to Make Up for Pandemic-Induced Losses - Texas Regulator

SAN ANTONIO, November 12 (Sputnik) - Oil and gas producers around the world are seeking a return in their production investments following loss of profits caused by the novel coronavirus disease pandemic, Texas oil regulator Jim Wright told Sputnik.

"I think that that shows not only OPEC [Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries], but the rest of the people that produce oil and gas throughout the world are really looking at return on their investment," Wright said on the margins of the US-Mexico Natural Gas Forum regarding the lack of increased oil production around the world.

As gasoline prices increase in the United States, President Joe Biden has been trying to convince OPEC to increase oil production but his request has been rejected. Meanwhile, he refuses to tap into the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve claiming it would have a minimal effect on prices at the pump.

"We had a big push 15 years ago. We went out and we drilled... which was a lot of capital required from investors and I think investors are now saying, 'Hey, I want to start seeing a better return,' which is where I think market sustainability needs to be, but it needs to be relevant on what people can afford," Wright said.

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Congress Probe May Seek Contempt, Other Proceedings Against Ex-Trump Chief of Staff-Chair

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - The US House Select Committee investigating the January 6 events at the Capitol will consider contempt proceedings against former White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows after he ignored a subpoena to appear before the panel, Chairman Bennie Thompson said.

"Mr. Meadows's actions today - choosing to defy the law - will force the Select Committee to consider pursuing contempt or other proceedings to enforce the subpoena," Thompson said in a statement on Friday.

Thompson said that Meadows, who served as chief of staff to former President Donald Trump, had failed to answer basic questions, including whether he was using a private cell phone to communicate on that day and where he stored the text messages from that day.

"Throughout US history, the White House has provided Congress with testimony and information when it has been in the public interest. There couldn't be a more compelling public interest than getting answers about an attack on our democracy," Thompson said.

Rolling Stone magazine reported on Monday that three sources said they interacted with the Trump administration, including Meadows, who they believe had a real opportunity to prevent any violence.

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Biden Administration's Policies Contribute to Spike in Gas Prices - Texas Oil Regulator

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Washington Post Edits Two Articles on Steele Dossier After New Info Emerges - Reports

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - The Washington Post corrected and removed parts of two articles about sources of the so-called "Steele dossier" that alleged collusion between the campaign of former US President Donald Trump and the Russian government in light of new information revealed by ongoing court cases, Washington Post Style reporter Paul Farhi said in an article.

"The Washington Post on Friday took the unusual step of correcting and removing large portions of two articles, published in March 2017 and February 2019, that had identified a Belarusian American businessman as a key source of the 'Steele dossier,' a collection of largely unverified reports that claimed the Russian government had compromising information about then-candidate Donald Trump," the article said on Friday.

References to the previously identified source, Belarusian-American businessman Sergei Millian, have been removed by the publication. Original versions of the articles were archived and dozens of other Washington Post stories that made the assertion have also been corrected and amended, Farhi said.

The corrections came following the indictment of analyst and researcher Igor Danchenko for lying to the FBI about not having contact with the creator of the Steele dossier. The indictment was part of special counsel John Durham's investigation into the origins and handling of the FBI's probe into alleged Russian collusion.

On Wednesday, Danchenko pleaded not guilty to all five counts of making false statements to the FBI. Danchenko's trial has been scheduled for the latter half of April 2022, prior to which he will stay under supervised release.

Washington Post executive editor Sally Buzbee said the publication could no longer back up the accuracy of the claims. The article's headline was amended, sections identifying Millian as the dossier's source were removed as was an accompanying video and an editor's note explaining the changes was added, Farhi said.

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US Court Frees Pop Star Britney Spears From Conservatorship - Reports

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge Brenda Penny freed Britney Spears from the conservatorship of her father James Spears during a court hearing on Friday, NBC News reported.

Penny ended the 13-year conservatorship of Britney's father James Spears, which allowed him to make professional, social and financial decisions over her, effective immediately.

In 2008, James was declared temporary conservator of Britney's estate, later made termless. Britney in June 2021 asked the court to terminate the conservatorship. In August, James said he would agree to step down as Britney's conservator and help prepare the transition to a new one. A court in September formally suspended the conservatorship.

Britney Spears, who was one of the most famous world singers at the beginning of the 21st century, faced mental issues as well as drug and alcohol addictions following a divorce in the late 2000s.

A crowd of demonstrators outside the courthouse carried flags and "Free Britney" signs while various speakers spoke about reforms to conservatorships and other activist issues. The crowd erupted in cheers after the news was announced that Spears' conservatorship had been terminated.

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Biden Says Conveyed Concerns to Moscow, Minsk Over Poland-Belarus Border Situation

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said the United States is concerned about the situation concerning migrants at the Belarus-Poland border and his administration has communicated the concerns to Moscow and Minsk, according to a White House press pool report.

"It's of great concern," Biden told reporters on Friday as quoted by the White House press pool. "We've communicated our concern to Russia. We've communicated our concern to Belarus. We think it's a problem."

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Wall Street Posts First Weekly Loss in 6 From Red-Hot US Inflation

NEW YORK, November 12 (Sputnik) - Wall Street stocks closed up on Friday but heavy losses in two previous days or more on fears about US inflation left the market with its first weekly loss in six.

"It's impossible not to look at everything this week through the lens of inflation, most notably in the US," Craig Erlam, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said. "In many ways, stock markets have performed remarkably against the backdrop of high inflation and higher rates to come. Central banks and low inflation have been a backstop for years, the next year is going to look very different."

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, a blue-chip index which groups mostly industrial stocks, closed up 179 points, or 0.5%, at 36,100. But three previous days of losses weighed on the Dow to pull it down 0.6% on the week, after a previous five-week record-breaking run that gave the index a net gain of 6%.

The S&P 500, which represents the top 500 US stocks, settled up 34 points, or 0.7%, at 4,683. The index fell sharply between Tuesday after Wednesday, leaving it with a net weekly loss of 0.3%. Prior to that, the S&P 500 rose a total of 8% over a five-week stretch filled with record highs.

The Nasdaq Composite Index, which groups Big Tech names such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, finished the day up 157 points, or 1%, at 15,861. Like the S&P, the Nasdaq stumbled between Tuesday and Wednesday, after repeatedly hitting record highs during a five-week rally that boosted the tech-laced index by almost 10%.

The US Consumer Price Index, which represents a basket of products ranging from gasoline and health care to groceries and rents, rose 6.2% during the year to October, the Labor Department reported earlier this week. It was the fastest growth of the so-called CPI since November 1990, an acceleration driven mostly by pump prices of fuel running at seven-year highs.

The University of Michigan poll results revealed earlier on Friday that consumer sentiment among Americans was at its lowest in a decade as many expected vastly reduced spending power in the coming years due to price pressures. But the poll results also revealed that political partisanship had muted the impact of inflation in the United States, with supporters of President

Joe Biden and his Democratic party more accepting of the situation versus rivals tied to the Republican party. The muted inflationary impact was one reason for Wall Street's rebound on Friday.

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Two US Navy Ships Including Destroyer Porter Arrive in Romania Friday - Statement

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - The US command and control ship Mount Whitney and the Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer Porter arrived in Romania to demonstrate the United States' commitment to supporting NATO allies in the region, the US Navy said. "The ships' presence in the Black Sea demonstrates the US Navy and NATO's continued commitment to collective defense of the European region and reinforces the strength of the NATO alliance," the Navy said in a press release on Friday. "As a valued NATO ally, Romania supports the Black Sea region and NATO allies and partners in ensuring security and stability in the region."

The two ships have been conducting joint and multilateral drills in the Black Sea with NATO partners, the release said.

The ships' arrival in Romania comes as the United States expresses concerns over Russia's military activity near its border with Ukraine.

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US Court Frees Pop Star Britney Spears From Conservatorship - Reports

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge Brenda Penny freed Britney Spears from the conservatorship of her father James Spears during a court hearing, NBC News reported.

Penny ended the 13-year conservatorship of Britney Spears' father James Spears, which allowed him to make professional, social and financial decisions over her in the past.

In 2008, James Spears was declared temporary conservator of his daughter's estate, later made termless. Britney Spears asked the court in June 2021 to terminate the conservatorship. In August, James Spears said he would agree to step down as Britney's conservator and help prepare the transition to a new one. A court in September formally suspended the conservatorship.

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US Launches Talks With Japan to Address Steel, Aluminum Excess Capacity - US Trade Office

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - The United States and Japan have started consultations to address issues concerning excess capacity in the global steel and aluminum market, the Office of the US Trade Representative's (USTR) office said.

"United States Trade Representative Katherine Tai and United States Secretary of Commerce Gina M. Raimondo today announced the start of consultations with Japan to address global steel and aluminum excess capacity, take effective measures to ensure the long-term viability of our steel and aluminum industries, and find solutions to strengthen our democratic alliance," the Office of the US Trade Representative said in a press release on Friday.

US and Japanese officials will also work to resolve bilateral issues related to steel and aluminum tariffs and the two countries intend to take beneficial actions that will restore market-oriented conditions, the release said.

The US officials emphasized concerns about China and its role in supporting trade-distorting non-market policies that threaten US steel and aluminum industries, the release added.

The World Trade Organization recently undertook a trade policy review of China and identified severe and persistent excess capacity in the steel and aluminum sectors as one of several problems with the country's trade regime.

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US Federal Grand Jury Indicts Ex-Trump Adviser Steve Bannon - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - A US federal grand jury indicted former Donald Trump adviser Steve Bannon on two counts of contempt of Congress for failing to cooperate with the House Select Committee investigating the January 6 events at the Capitol, the Justice Department of Justice said.

"Stephen K. Bannon was indicted today by a federal grand jury on two counts of contempt of Congress stemming from his failure to comply with a subpoena issued by the House Select Committee investigating the Jan. 6 breach of the U.S. Capitol," the Justice Department said in a press release on Friday.

Bannon may face up to two years in prison if convicted of both counts, the release said.

The arraignment date in the case has not yet been set in the US District Court for the District of Columbia,, the release added.

The US House Select Committee has been trying to obtain records from the National Archives about communications in the Trump White House related to the January 6 event. However, this week a court temporarily paused a court order allowing records to be turned over to the House panel and an oral argument has been set for November 30.

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Wisconsin to Send 500 National Guard Troops to Kenosha for Rittenhouse Verdict - Governor

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - The Wisconsin National Guard will be deploying 500 troops outside the city of Kenosha should local law enforcement need assistance following the upcoming end of the Kyle Rittenhouse trial, Governor Tony Evers' office said on Friday, "Approximately 500 Wisconsin Army National Guard troops are reporting for State Active Duty as authorized by Gov. Tony Evers to support local partners in ensuring public safety ... Members of the Wisconsin National Guard will stage outside Kenosha in a standby status to respond if requested by local law enforcement agencies," the office said in a press release circulated by reporters on Twitter.

The decision was made several days before the expected end of Rittenhouse's trial, the verdict of which is expected to come sometime next week. Rittenhouse faces charges including murder for shooting three men, killing two, during racial justice riots in Kenosha in August 2020.

Evers in the statement urged people with plans to travel to Kenosha to reconsider them. He also encouraged those who do plan to demonstrate to do so safely and peacefully.

Both the prosecution and defense teams have concluded their cases, with closing arguments scheduled for Monday of next week. The jury will then receive instructions from Judge Bruce Schroeder before deliberating on a verdict, which could take hours or days.

The National Guard deployed to the city will not be allowed to impede the ability of people to peacefully protest or the media to report, the press release said.

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Petroleum Supplies Sufficient to Significantly Reduce Amount Purchased From Iran-Biden

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - There is a sufficient supply of petroleum from other countries than Iran to significantly reduce the amount of the product purchased from the country, US President Joe Biden said.

"[T]here is a sufficient supply of petroleum and petroleum products from countries other than Iran to permit a significant reduction in the volume of petroleum and petroleum products purchased from Iran by or through foreign financial institutions," Biden said in a memorandum on Friday.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) -

PARIS SUMMIT ON LIBYA

* Russia and Turkey should withdraw their troops from Libya without delay in order to stabilize the country, French President Emmanuel Macron said on Friday.

* The decisions of the Paris conference on Libya confirmed the phased and synchronized formula for the withdrawal of foreign military from Libya, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.

* The withdrawal of foreign troops from Libya should not remain on paper, outgoing German Chancellor Angela Merkel said.

BELARUS-POLAND BORDER CRISIS

* The United Nations calls on the Belarusian and Polish authorities not to view the thousands of vulnerable migrants stranded at the border as a threat and to respect their basic human rights, UN spokesman Farhan Haq said on Friday.

* French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian and Defense Minister Florence Parly urged their Russian counterparts, Sergey Lavrov and Sergei Shoigu, at a meeting in Paris to use their close ties with Minsk to resolve the crisis on the Belarusian-Polish border, the French Foreign Ministry said in a communique.

* The Iraqi authorities have suspended direct flights to Belarus given the migration crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border, the Iraqi foreign ministry said.

* Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Vershinin and International Organization for Migration (IOM) Director General Antonio Vitorino discussed the situation in Afghanistan, Syria and on the Belarusian-Polish border, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

* The United States is prepared to use "various tools" at its disposal in response to Belarus using migration as a political weapon, US State Secretary Antony Blinken said.

RUSSIA-FRANCE RELATIONS

* French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian and Defense Minister Florence Parly at a meeting with their Russian counterparts, Sergey Lavrov and Sergei Shoigu, welcomed the resumption of the dialogue between Russia and the United States on strategic stability, the French Foreign Ministry said in a communique on Friday.

* Le Drian and Parly stressed the importance of maintaining channels of dialogue between the EU and Russia, as well as NATO and Moscow, the communique says.

* Le Drian and Parly called on Lavrov and Shoigu to agree to hold a ministerial meeting in the Normandy format on Ukraine, the French Foreign Ministry said.

* Lavrov and Shoigu discussed strategic stability, NATO-Russia relations and other issues with Le Drian and Parly, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

* France and Russia agreed on the necessity to observe Minsk agreements on Donbas during the 2+2 format meeting between foreign and defense ministers, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

* Lavrov and Shoigu discussed the current situation at the Belarusian-Polish border amid the influx of migrants with Le Drian and Parly, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

APEC SUMMIT

* Leaders of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) intend to expand access of countries to digital technologies, according to a declaration adopted after the summit on Friday.

* APEC leaders recognize the importance of stable energy markets and support the transition to clean energy, the summit's final declaration says.

* Russia is interested in cooperation with APEC member states on digitalization, President Vladimir Putin said.

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

* The United States is monitoring the buildup of Russian forces near the border with Ukraine but has not seen any indication that Moscow is planning to invade the country tonight or tomorrow Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley said on Friday.

* German acting Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian and their Ukrainian counterpart, Dmytro Kuleba, will meet on Monday in Brussels, German Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Andrea Sasse said.

* The United States had extensive interactions with its European allies as well as with Russia over the latter's military activities near the border with Ukraine, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said.

* Moscow calls on Paris and Berlin to force the Ukrainian authorities to comply with the Minsk agreements, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.

MILITARY DRILLS IN BELARUS

* A subdivision of the Russian Airborne Forces has worked out a practical landing in Belarus, the tasks of the exercise have been completed in full, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Friday.

* Belarusian and Russian paratroopers are performing combat training tasks at a training ground in Belarus amid intensifying military activity at Belarus' western border, the Belarusian Defense Ministry said.

* Poland sees exercises in Belarus by Russian paratroopers as a threat, Polish Deputy Foreign Minister Marcin Przydacz said.

* Two Russian servicemen were killed on Friday during a parachute landing in Belarus, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

HARRIS' TRIP TO PARIS

* Washington and Paris have reaffirmed their commitment to cooperate on counterterrorism, US Vice President Kamala Harris said after her meeting with French President Emmanuel Macron.

* Harris said that she did not discuss the AUKUS defense pact during her meeting with Macron.

* The Belarusian government is engaged in "very troubling activity" at the border with Poland, Harris said.

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Blue Origin Mourns Shatner Space Mission Crew Mate Killed in Plane Crash – Statement

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) – US high tech multi-millionaire Glen de Vries, who flew into space last month with 90-year-old "Star Trek" actor William Shatner, has died in a small plane crash in his state of New Jersey, the Blue Origin Company said in a tribute on Friday. "We are devastated to hear of the sudden passing of Glen de Vries," the company said in a Twitter statement. "He brought so much life and energy to the entire Blue Origin team and to his fellow crewmates. His passion for aviation, his charitable work, and his dedication to his craft will long be revered and admired."

The light plane left Essex County Airport in Caldwell, New Jersey on what should have been a routine trip to Sussex Airport but was reported missing, media reported. Emergency workers found its remains at Hampton Township 60 miles west of New York City, the reports said. De Vries, 49, founded Medidata Solutions, a successful advanced technology company, and was a trustee at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. He traveled aboard Blue Origin's New Shepard spacecraft on October 13, spending more than 10 minutes in space after launching along with Shatner and others.

Flight instructor Thomas Fischer, 54, was also killed in the crash, the reports said.

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Congresswoman Omar Seeks to Block US Arms Sale to Saudi Arabia Amid Yemen Conflict

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - US Congresswoman Ilhan Omar said on Friday that she has filed a resolution in the Senate to block a \$650 million advanced air-to-air missiles sale to Saudi Arabia as the deal would add to the deaths, starvation and torture of Yemenis.

"It is simply unconscionable to sell weapons to Saudi Arabia while they continue to slaughter innocent people and starve millions in Yemen, kill and torture dissidents, and support modern-day slavery," Omar said in a statement.

The armed conflict in Yemen has killed and injured thousands of Yemeni civilians since it began in 2014. The United Nations has said at least 10,000 children had been wounded or killed in the seven-year conflict.

The resolution underscores the wariness of some Democrats to extend Saudi Arabia's firepower against rebels in Yemen.

If passed, the resolution would prohibit the sale of 280 advanced medium-range air-to-air missiles, along with 596 missile launchers, support equipment, spare parts and US government and contractor engineering and technical support.

The State Department has said the deal would only bolster the air defense capabilities of Saudi Arabia and replenish its existing arms' inventory.

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State Dept. Condemns American Reporter's Sentencing in Myanmar

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - The United States denounces the decision of Myanmar authorities to sentence American journalist Danny Fenster, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement on Friday.

A military court in Myanmar has sentenced Fenster to 11 years in prison, according to his lawyer.

"The United States condemns this decision. We are closely monitoring Danny's situation and will continue to work for his immediate release," Price said.

He called the ruling an unjust conviction of an innocent person.

Fenster, 37, worked as managing editor of the Frontier Myanmar news magazine and was detained on May 24 at Yangon International Airport as he attempted to board a plane to leave the country.

Media reported in June that Fenster appeared before a special court in Yangon's Insein Prison to face charges under a law that criminalizes encouraging dissent against the Myanmar military.

On February 1, the military seized control of Myanmar in a coup that prompted nationwide protests. The military justified their action by alleged election fraud blamed on civilian government leaders and promised to transfer power after new elections are held.

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70-Year-Old Alabama Man Brought Guns, Explosive Components to Jan. 6 Riot – Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) – A 71-year-old man from Alabama has pleaded guilty to bringing firearms and the components to make explosive Molotov cocktails to the US Capitol on the day it was stormed by protestors on January 6, the Department of Justice said on Friday. "Lonnie Leroy Coffman, 71, of Falkville, Alabama, pleaded guilty today to federal and local firearms offenses stemming from the discovery of weapons in his pickup truck parked near the US Capitol on January 6," the department said in a press release.

According to his plea agreement, Coffman traveled from Alabama to Washington several days before the riot and parked his red GMC Sierra pickup truck at the 300 block of First Street, SE, on the morning of January 6, less than half a mile away from the US Capitol Building, the release said.

Coffman admitted in the plea agreement that he exited the pickup truck at 9:20 a.m. and walked in the direction of the US Capitol Building, and toward a rally near the National Mall, the Justice Department noted.

"Inside the pickup truck were several loaded firearms ... hundreds of rounds of ammunition, large-capacity ammunition feeding devices, a crossbow with bolts, machetes, camouflage smoke devices, a stun gun and a cooler containing 11 mason jars filled with ignitable ingredients for Molotov cocktail incendiary weapons," the release read.

He has pleaded guilty to two counts of possession of an unregistered firearm, a federal offense and to carrying a pistol without a license. He now faces up to 10 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine for each of the federal offenses, the Justice Department said.

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Biden, First Lady to Host Tribal Nations Summit Next Week - White House

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and First Lady Jill Biden will host a tribal nations summit at the White House next week, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday during a press briefing.

"On Monday, the President and First Lady will participate in a tribal nations summit, coinciding with National Native American Heritage Month. This will be the first summit since 2016, and the first time that this summit has been hosted at the White House," Psaki said.

Biden will address tribal leaders and announce steps to improve public safety and justice for Native Americans, Psaki said. He will also discuss how to protect private lands, treaty rights and sacred places, she added.

Vice President Kamala Harris will attend the summit on Tuesday alongside members of the cabinet in order to discuss a number of agency-specific policy deliverables, Psaki said.

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US Briefly Delaying Ethiopian, TPLF Sanctions to See if Talks Make Progress - White House

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - The US is delaying sanctions against the Ethiopian military and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) rebel group in order to leave space for the parties to settle the conflict through talks, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday during a press briefing.

"We are briefly delaying plans to roll out sanctions targeting elements aligned with the TPLF and Ethiopian military to allow time and space to see if these AU-led talks can make progress. If they do not seize the opportunity and the parties continue escalating the war, we will move forward with these sanctions, but we are currently leaving space for these talks to continue," Psaki said. The Biden administration earlier on Friday sanctioned four Eritrean entities and two individuals in connection with the conflict in northern Ethiopia. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that Eritrea's presence in Ethiopia is prolonging the conflict and is posing a significant obstacle to a cessation of hostilities.

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WFP Says More Syrians Face Hunger Today Than at Any Time Throughout War - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, November 12 (Sputnik) - UN World Food Program (WFP) Executive Director David Beasley concluded his three-day visit to Syria where he warned that hunger had reached the highest level since the onset of the country's ten-year-long war, the WFP said in a press release on Friday.

"During a three-day visit to the country, Beasley met with vulnerable families receiving WFP food assistance in Aleppo. Mothers he spoke to in nutrition and food distribution centers complained about the skyrocketing food prices and described the hard choices they must make to survive," the release said.

Almost 60% of the population - 12.4 million people - are now food insecure, representing a 57% increase since 2019 and the highest number ever recorded in the country's history, the release said.

"Conflict, climate change, COVID-19 and now the cost of living are pushing people beyond their limits," Beasley said in the release.

The agricultural sector struggles to produce enough to meet the needs of the Syrian people, and food prices have more than doubled compared to 2020, putting millions of families beyond the reach. In addition, the financial crisis in neighboring Lebanon has contributed to Syria's economic downturn.

While the WFP assists over five million people each month, it faces a severe funding shortage which recently pushed it to reduce the monthly food rations. The UN agency has said it urgently needs \$480 million for the next six months and is currently funded at 31%.

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US Discusses With European, Russian Officials Ukraine Border Situation - White House

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - The United States had extensive interactions with its European allies as well as with Russia over the latter's military activities near the border with Ukraine, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"[I]n recent weeks, and certainly days, we have had extensive interactions with our European allies and partners, including with Ukraine, about our concern about these reports and during these meetings, we have of course been discussing our concerns about the Russian military activities and their harsh rhetoric toward Ukraine," Psaki said during a press briefing.

Psaki added that the Biden administration has also had discussions with Russian officials regarding the situation to underscore that any allegedly aggressive actions would be of "great concern" to the United States.

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UNSC Extends Peacekeeping Mission in CAR for 1 Year, Russia and China Abstain

UNITED NATIONS, November 12 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council adopted a resolution on Friday extending for another year the mandate of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), with Russia and China abstaining.

The text of the resolution "decides to extend the mandate of MINUSCA until 15 November 2022."

MINUSCA will continue to be composed of up to 14,400 military and 3,020 police personnel, and intends to keep this number under continuous review, the document reads.

The resolution was supported by 13 members of the UN Security Council. Russia cited concerns that the peacekeeping mission has been a "source of scandal" on numerous occasions, such as allegations of sexual misconduct and more recent claims of diamond smuggling out of the country, since its establishment in 2014.

"We note that the constant negative background surrounding MINUSCA is hampering the Security Council and undermines trust in the UN itself," Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Anna Evstigneeva, said after the vote.

"We can't call its work competent and we are going to carefully monitor the situation," she added.

Earlier in the month, media reported that police were investigating the alleged involvement of Portuguese peacekeepers from MINUSCA in the smuggling of diamonds and gold into European countries.

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UN Urges Poland, Belarus Not to View Vulnerable People at Border as Threat - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, November 12 (Sputnik) - The United Nations calls on the Belarusian and Polish authorities not to view the thousands of vulnerable migrants stranded at the border as a threat and to respect their basic human rights, UN spokesman Farhan Haq said on Friday. "It's every country's sovereign right to determine how they deal with the situation at their borders," Haq said during a press briefing when asked about the United Nations' position on bringing additional troops to the border amid the crisis. "But, my point is that... they [migrants] are a group of people who are hungry, tired, they need health care, they need shelter. They should not be seen as a threat. And we're urging everyone not to see them as such," Haq said.

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US Military Chief Milley Says No Indication Russia to Invade Ukraine Tonight, Tomorrow

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - The United States is monitoring the buildup of Russian forces near the border with Ukraine but has not seen any indication that Moscow is planning to invade the country tonight or tomorrow Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley said on Friday. "Russia is conducting larger-scale maneuvers and assembling forces on the Russian side of the Ukrainian border. Last April, they did something very similar and it ended up being a series of exercises. We are watching it very closely. It is not something that is overtly aggressive right this minute, in other words, there's not something that indicates that they're going to invade tonight or tomorrow sort of thing, but we're watching all the indicators very very closely," Milley said during an interview at Duke University.

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UN Says Released Staffer in Ethiopia Detained Again, 9 Others Remain in Detention

UNITED NATIONS, November 12 (Sputnik) - The Ethiopian authorities have detained again a United Nations staff member who was arrested and released earlier, while nine other local employees still remain under arrest, UN spokesperson Farhan Haq said on Friday. "None of the nine people in detention have been released as far as we are aware. But we are aware that a tenth person has now also been detained," Haq said during a press briefing. The UN spokesperson noted that none of the more than 70 subcontractor drivers in Ethiopia have been released since the arrests were executed across the country on Tuesday.

"We're pushing on all the doors that we can, but we have not made the progress that we would have liked to have made," Haq said.

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Biden Nominates Robert Califf to Head US Food and Drug Administration - White House

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has nominated Dr. Robert Califf to be the next chief of the US Food and Drug Administration, the White House said on Friday. "Dr. Robert Califf is one of the most experienced clinical trialists in the country, and has the experience and expertise to lead the Food and Drug Administration during a critical time in our nation's fight to put an end to the coronavirus pandemic," the White House quoted Biden in a release.

The US president noted that the FDA makes decisions with respect to vaccine approval and that is why its mission is critical.

"I am confident Dr. Califf will ensure that the FDA continues its science and data drive decision-making. Dr. Califf had strong bipartisan support in the Senate in 2016, and I urge the Senate to swiftly confirm Dr. Califf so he can continue the important work being done at this critical moment," Biden said.

Califf is an expert in clinical trial research, health care quality and cardiovascular medicine, and has served as FDA Commissioner from 2016-2017. He presently works as head of clinical policy at the Verily Life Sciences research organization.

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Some 4.4Mln Americans Left Jobs in September, Extending Record Quit Rate - Labor Data

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - The record numbers of Americans quitting work since the advent of the coronavirus pandemic reached a new peak in September, with 4.4 million walking away from their jobs amid child care and other pressures, the Labor Department reported on Friday.

"Within separations, the quits level and rate increased to a series high of 4.4 million and 3.0 percent, respectively," the department said in its JOLTS, or Job Openings And Labor Turnover, report.

The total number of job openings were little changed in September, with 10.4 million positions available at a rate of 6.6%, the JOLTS report showed.

The Federal Reserve said in its Beige Book report for October that demand for workers was high in an economy rebounding aggressively from the coronavirus pandemic but that labor growth had also been constricted by a low supply of available people.

Child-care issues and vaccine mandates were among the main reasons for quits, the Fed said, as working mothers were unable to afford child care due to incomes or spending power reduced by the pandemic while political and other beliefs prevented many from receiving COVID-19 shots as a condition for staying on the job.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus. At least 5 million of those jobs have yet to return, officials say.

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Biden, Xi to Hold Virtual Meeting on Monday Night US Eastern Time - White House

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping will hold their virtual bilateral summit on Monday night, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said.

"In the evening of Monday November 15 in Washington, DC, President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. will meet virtually with President Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China (PRC)," Psaki said during a press release on Friday. "Following their September 9 phone call, the two leaders will discuss ways to responsibly manage the competition between the United States and the PRC, as well as ways to work together where our interests align."

Biden will make clear to Xi the United States' intentions and priorities, including its concerns with some of Beijing's actions, Psaki said.

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US Ready to Pursue More Ethiopia Sanctions, Including Against Tigray Rebels - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - The United States stands ready to pursue more Ethiopia-related sanctions, including against the rebel Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), a senior administration official said on Friday.

"The United States remains gravely concerned about the conduct of all parties of the conflict, including Eritrean forces and stands ready to pursue additional actions, including against the Government of Ethiopia and the TPLF, if parties do not make any tangible progress toward a cessation of hostilities," the official told reporters in a press briefing.

Earlier in the day, the United States announced Ethiopia-related sanctions against two individuals and four entities, including the Eritrean Defense Forces.

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US Imposes Ethiopia-Related Sanctions on 2 Individuals, 4 Entities - Treasury

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions related to the situation in Ethiopia against two individuals and four entities, including against the Eritrean Defense Forces, the US Department of the Treasury said in a statement on Friday.

"The Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) has issued Ethiopia General License 4, 'Authorizing the Wind Down of Transactions Involving Hidri Trust or Red Sea Trading Corporation,'" the statement said.

The sanctions target senior Eritrean military officer Abraha Kassa, Eritrean diplomat Hagos Ghebrehwet and the Eritrean Defense Forces, the Hidri Trust group, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice organization as well as the Red Sea Trading Corporation.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said earlier that Eritrea's presence in Ethiopia is prolonging the conflict and is posing a significant obstacle to a cessation of hostilities.

"Credible accounts implicate Eritrean forces in serious human rights abuses, and the United States remains gravely concerned about the conduct of all parties to the conflict. Eritrean forces should immediately withdraw from Ethiopia," Blinken said.

Ethiopia has been engulfed in an internal conflict since November of last year when the central government accused the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) of attacking a military base and launched a counter operation in the northern parts of the country. Hostilities have since been ongoing on despite a June ceasefire.

Earlier this month, the country declared a six-month state of emergency nationwide as TPLF rebels threatened to advance on the capital of Addis Ababa.

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US Consumer Sentiment Hits Decade Lows Amid Red-Hot Inflation - UMich Poll

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - Consumer sentiment among Americans, whose spending accounts for 70% of the US economy, is at its lowest in a decade as soaring inflation leaves many with expectations of vastly reduced spending power in the coming years, the University of Michigan said in its closely-watched consumer poll.

"One-in-four consumers cited inflationary reductions in their living standards in November, with lower income and older consumers voicing the greatest impact," Richard Curtin, UMich chief economist for its survey of consumers, said after its Index of Consumer Sentiment came in at 13.1% lower for November versus October.

UMich's analysis showed that there was growing belief among consumers that no effective policies have yet been developed by those in authority to reduce the damage from surging inflation in an economy rebounding aggressively from the nearly two-year long coronavirus pandemic.

"The description that inflation would be 'transient' has the undertone that consumers could 'grin and bear it' as economic policies counted on a quick and automatic self-correction to supply and

labor shortages," Curtin said. "Instead, the pandemic caused economic dislocation unlike any prior recession, and has been intertwined with partisan interpretations of economic developments."

If there was a caveat to the worrisome mood among consumers, it was political partisanship as supporters of President Joe Biden and his Democratic Party seemed more accepting of the current inflationary situation versus his opponents tied to the Republican Party, the UMich poll showed.

"The partisan differences in perceptions were not minor, but were large and equal in size," Curtin said. "The stylized difference is that one side favors maximizing economic growth and efficiency, the other side on maximizing distributional equity and fairness. Such legislative challenges are won or lost by extreme partisan support drawn from both sides of the aisle. Such extremes, however, make achieving their policy goals much more important than providing effective counter measures to ongoing economic hardships."

Prior to the UMich data, the Labor Department reported that the US Consumer Price Index, which represents a basket of products ranging from gasoline and health care to groceries and rents, rose 6.2% during the year to October. It was the fastest growth of the CPI since November 1990, an acceleration driven mostly by pump prices of fuel running at seven-year highs.

The US economy shrank by 3.5% for all of 2020 due to shutdowns and other disruptions caused by the COVID-19 crisis. Growth this year has been spotty, with an annualized 3.5% expansion in the first quarter, 3.6% in the second and 2.0% in the third.

The Federal Reserve announced in March that it expected a 6.5% economic expansion for all of 2021 and has not changed its target despite the uneven growth in the past three quarters. The problem for the Fed though is inflation as wages and the prices of almost everything have soared from the lows of the pandemic.

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Qatar Does Not Consider Normalizing Ties With Syria 'Right Now' - Foreign Minister

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - Qatar does not plan to normalize its ties with Damascus, and support political process to solve the ongoing conflict in the country, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Affairs Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani said on Friday.

"We view that normalizing with [Bashar] Assad regime is not a step that we are thinking of or considering right now and we believe that [for] all the crimes he has committed against his own people he needs to be held accountable," Al-Thani said during a joint press conference with US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken.

However, Al-Thani said Qatar supports a peaceful political transition in Syria with the support of the UN Security Council resolution 2254.

The decade-long conflict in Syria erupted as a wave of the so-called Arab Spring protests spread across the Middle East and North Africa. The conflict has since turned into a full-scale war between opposition and terrorist groups seeking to topple the Assad government. This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Blinken Says Concerned About Potential for Ethiopia to Implode if Conflict Not Resolved

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken expressed concerns on Friday that Ethiopia has the potential to implode unless a conflict in the northern Tigray region is resolved.

"I am very concerned about the potential for Ethiopia to implode given what we are seeing, both in Tigray, but also as we have different forces and different ethnic groups that are increasingly at odds," Blinken said at a meeting with Qatari Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani. "We are working very closely to support the efforts of the former Nigerian President Obasanjo to mediate a way forward with all the Ethiopian parties."

The conflict in Ethiopia may spill over into other countries in the region, Blinken added. Earlier in the day, the United States announced Ethiopia-related sanctions against two individuals and four entities, including against the Eritrean Defense Forces that are taking part in the conflict.

Northern Ethiopia has been engulfed in an internal conflict since November last year, when the central government accused the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) of attacking a military base and launched a counter operation in Tigray region. Hostilities have since been going on despite a June ceasefire.

Earlier this month, the country declared a six-month state of emergency nationwide as TPLF rebels threatened to advance on the capital of Addis Ababa.

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UNICEF Chief Says Girls in Afghanistan at Increased Risk of Child Marriage - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, November 12 (Sputnik) - UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) Executive Director Henrietta Fore said on Friday that she is concerned about reports indicating an increasing number of child marriages in Afghanistan after the country was taken over by the Taliban (sanctioned by the United Nations over terrorist activities).

"We have received credible reports of families offering daughters as young as 20 days old up for future marriage in return for a dowry," Fore said in a statement.

Fore explained that the "extremely dire" economic situation in Afghanistan forces families there to make desperate choices such as marrying girls off at a very young age.

"As most teenage girls are still not allowed to go back to school, the risk of child marriage is now even higher," Fore said.

Fore called on the authorities to prioritize the reopening of schools for girls and allow female teachers to return to their work without any further delays.

Meanwhile, UNICEF has started to disperse cash assistance to offset the risk of hunger and child marriages. The agency also works with religious leaders to ensure that they are not involved in the so-called Nekah marriage contract in Afghanistan.

Respecting women's rights is one of the conditions of international recognition of the Taliban government in Afghanistan.

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Blinken Says Qatar Agreed to Act as 'Protecting Power' of US in Afghanistan

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - Qatar will become a "protecting power" of the United States in Afghanistan by way of establishing a separate US interests section within its embassy in Kabul that will provide consular services and monitor the condition of the US diplomatic facilities there.

"Today, we are starting two new agreements that reflect our deepening collaboration on Afghanistan. The first establishes Qatar as the United States protecting power in Afghanistan. Qatar will establish a US interests section within its embassy in Afghanistan to provide certain consular services and monitor the condition and security of US diplomatic facilities," Blinken said during a bilateral meeting with Qatari Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani.

The second agreement will focus on facilitating travel of Afghans with US Special Immigrant Visas out of the country with Qatar being a transit point for eligible evacuees, Blinken said.

According to the state secretary, the effort to evacuate Americans from Afghanistan "will continue." He added that since August 31, when the country completed its troop withdrawal, the US has evacuated "roughly 380 Americans."

In early August, the Taliban (under UN sanctions for terrorism) stepped up their offensive against the Afghan government forces and entered Kabul on August 15, completing a takeover of the country. The developments prompted a mass evacuation of foreigners as well as Afghans who had collaborated with or worked for foreign troops and organizations.

The United States has taken in more than 40,000 individuals evacuated from Afghanistan. Approximately 13% of the 40,000 individuals are US citizens, 8% lawful permanent residents, and 79% Special Immigrant Visa holders, applicants, or other vulnerable Afghan nationals.

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Blinken Says US Ready to Use Various Tools to Address Belarus' Use of Migration as Weapon

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - The United States is prepared to use "various tools" at its disposal in response to Belarus using migration as a political weapon, US State Secretary Antony Blinken said on Friday.

"We are also very concerned by efforts by Belarus to use migration as a political weapon. I am not gonna preview any possible sanctions, but we are looking at various tools that we have," Blinken said at a press conference with Qatar Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Affairs Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani.

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Biden Discusses Ways to Deepen Economic Engagement in Indo-Pacific During APEC Forum

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden participated in an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum on Friday and discussed ways to deepen economic engagement in the Indo-Pacific among a range of other issues, the White House said. "Today President Joseph R. Biden Jr. participated in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Virtual Leaders' Meeting hosted by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern of New Zealand," the White House said in a press release. "The President discussed ways to unleash the economic power of the region and to deepen U.S. economic engagement throughout the Indo-Pacific." The forum agenda also included discussion of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic and the economic recovery. Biden has pledged to continue sharing COVID-19 vaccine doses and investing in their manufacturing abroad to enhance the global health security, the release added. During the meeting, Biden has reiterated his commitment to advance open trade and investment in the region and ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific, according to the release.

The APEC platform was founded in 1989 and brings together 21 member economies, including Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Peru, the Philippines, Russia, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, the United States and Vietnam.

In August, US Vice President Kamala Harris stated that the United States is offering to host the APEC forum in 2023, underscoring the country's charm offensive to win over allies and partners in Southeast Asia after botched troop withdrawal from Afghanistan.

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Harris Says Did Not Discuss AUKUS With Macron

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) – US Vice President Kamala Harris said on Monday that she did not discuss the AUKUS defense pact during her meeting with French President Emmanuel Macron.

"That was not the purpose of this trip," she told reporters during a press conference.

Harris began her visit to Paris on Tuesday. The following day, she held bilateral talks with Macron in a follow-up to the latter's meeting with President Joe Biden, as the two countries work to mend relations after a dispute related to AUKUS.

Harris noted that she had discussed with Macron the issues that are challenging for both countries. "We talked about our mutual interest in Western Hemisphere ... We talked extensively about our mutual interests," she said.

They discussed Africa and bilateral and multilateral alliances, she added.

In September, the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia unveiled their trilateral defense pact, which saw Canberra ditch a bilateral \$66 billion submarine deal with Paris.

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SpaceX Postpones Launch of Starlink Satellite Fleet Due to Poor Weather - Company

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - SpaceX has delayed the latest launch of a series of its Starlink satellites on Friday morning due to poor weather conditions, the company announced, adding that they are looking at Saturday as the new launch day.

"Standing down from today's launch due to weather. Forecast improves to 80% favorable for tomorrow's launch opportunity at 7:19 a.m. EST," the company tweeted.

This Friday, the California-based group was seeking to launch 53 Starlink satellites from Florida to continue expanding its satellite fleet.

Founded by Elon Musk, SpaceX's Starlink satellite internet program utilizes satellites in low-Earth orbit with the aim of providing affordable access to broadband internet across the world. The first Starlink satellite was launched in 2019 and the constellation now has over 1,500 operational satellites. During the beta, users can expect to see data speeds vary from 50Mb/s to 150Mb/s and latency from 20ms to 40ms in most locations over the next several months as the company enhanced the Starlink system.

The mission aims to put 60 Starlink satellites into orbit. If successful at its next launch opportunity, it will expand SpaceX's fleet of broadband relay satellites to include over 1,200 (some of them are prototypes that are no longer in service).

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US, France Reaffirm Commitment to Cooperate on Counterterrorism - Harris

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - Washington and Paris have reaffirmed their commitment to cooperate on counterterrorism, US Vice President Kamala Harris said on Friday after her meeting with French President Emmanuel Macron.

Harris began her visit to Paris on Tuesday. The following day, she held bilateral talks with Macron in a follow-up to the latter's meeting with President Joe Biden, as the two countries work to mend relations after a dispute related to the AUKUS defense pact.

"We renewed our commitment to work with each other on counterterrorism," she said.

France and the US also reaffirmed their commitment to the fight against terrorism in the Sahel region, she added.

"We have a mutual concern there that relates to the ongoing challenges that the countries in the Sahel [region] are facing ... Among the many priorities that we share is a concern about what we need to do to address potential violence and ongoing violence," she said.

Sahel region, which is notorious for terrorist activities, has high levels of poverty, and regular outbreaks of violence. Over the past three years, the Sahel countries — Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger — have seen a surge in armed violence, as a result of which over 1.4 million people — more than half of whom are under 15 — have been displaced in the region.

France has been conducting Operation Barkhane against terrorist groups in the Sahel region since August 1, 2014.

In June, Macron announced changes to the country's military presence in the region, including plans to finish the counterterrorism operation by the first quarter of 2022. The French leader said that a broader international effort would be made instead.